

1 Biography and Research Method

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Introduction

The guiding feature of biographical research is that it attempts to suit its method to its purpose. We may say that biographical research has both general and specific purposes. The general purpose is to provide greater insight than hitherto into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives. Given that individual lives are part of a cultural network, information gained through biographical research will relate to an understanding of the wider society. The specific purpose of the research will be the analysis of a particular life or lives for some designated reason - for example in examining the world of work it may be appropriate to look at the biographical routes by which given individuals become teachers, nurses, prostitutes, librarians, actors, etc. Given the circumstances of the research enterprise such a piece of research may be small-scale or large-scale. What is at issue is not the scale of the research but the purpose for which it is required.

Although the methodological considerations that will be discussed in this chapter typically relate to the biographical examination of small populations requiring in depth, qualitative modes of investigation what is not suggested here is that qualitative research is de jure superior to quantitative research. Well-judged quantitative research can yield useful results in situations where a qualitative approach would be simply a waste of time or be impossible to use (Erben, 1996). This said, the mode of disclosure characteristic of biographical research will be more textually replete than that conventionally representative of quantitative procedures. Thus, while numbers of respondents may be small in biographical research, the demands made upon the readers of the research involves a degree of vicarious participation not required in quantitative investigation. The validation of such research (in fact, of any research) is based upon the degree of consensus among those for whom the investigation is thought to be of interest and relevance. The descriptions, organization, conclusions and formulations represented in the research receive their validation by an experienced group of peers who regard the study as significant, worthwhile and in concert with its aims.

It is clear that one of the advantages of biographical research is that the variety that is the life of the subject will guide researchers against too rigid a view of methodology. As a number of methodologists have commented (e.g. Erickson, 1986; Woolcott, 1992) too concentrated a focus on research techniques can dull the understanding of the relationship between method and the purpose of the investigation.

The useful comment of Geertz's that, 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' indicates the reciprocal, constitutive nature of object and subject (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). As such, the interpretive requirement is that the complex life-accounts of research subjects be studied, described and appreciated using as varied a repertoire of investigative approaches as would any cultural texts.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce some of the points that will need to be borne in mind when conducting biographical research. Although there is no concrete set of research methods for biographical research there is, nonetheless, a sufficiently integrated complex of approaches that most researchers will need to follow. The chapter will be divided into three sections. Firstly, the 'Empirical Particularities of Biographical Research' will enumerate and outline most of the procedures that will be necessary in carrying out any biographical research, but special reference will be made to the biographical investigation of small groups or samples. Secondly, a justification and discussion of the importance of 'Imagination' as a methodological tool in biographical research will be outlined. Thirdly, there will be a rehearsal of the importance of the concept of 'Narrative' as an essential requirement for biographical research.

Empirical particularities

Biographical method will involve the collection of documents from a wide variety of sources from a variety of media. These documents are, typically, likely to be autobiographies, existing biographies, photographs, videos and films, oral histories, official records, letters, diaries, postcards, family trees and information (sometimes fragmentary) located in sources not primarily concerned with the subject. While these 'life documents' (Denzin, 1989, p. 7) may take many forms, the collection of contemporary biographical data through interview is one that is especially useful to educational and other social science researchers.

What the size of such an interview sample should be will be dictated by the purpose for which the research is being carried out. The exact size of any sample in qualitative research cannot be ascertained through quantitative methods. It is for this reason that it is all the more important that the consciously chosen sample must correspond to the overall aims of the study. This position has now been well rehearsed in some useful general discussion of qualitative research (e.g. Bogdan and Biklan, 1982; Burgess, 1984; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In the case of the biographical analysis of the occupational identity of teachers of a given subject specialism, for instance, informants selected will need to have considerable experience of and be willing to assist in, the research process. It is therefore 'essential for the researcher to discover who will be the most appropriate informant before beginning [detailed] interviews' (Morse, 1991, p. 129). The informants' knowledge of the subject specialism will be the route by which the intricacies of a given occupational identity will be explored. The characteristics of such selfhood are thus located in the dialectic between the subject specialism and other features of the informants' lives. It may be appropriate to use several subjects in such an investigation for reasons of comparative analysis. However, a single case may be valid given that the respondent is sufficiently representative of a known cohort. Although no two teachers will be exactly alike it is unlikely that they will not echo common themes and concerns in relation to the given demands of an established curriculum (Jardine, 1992; Rampazi, 1996). The appropriate amount of data gained through interview will be determined both by respondents' feeling they have made all the observations they feel necessary and the researcher ceasing to observe novel cues. Saturation is unlikely to have occurred when only one of these criteria is met (Bertaux, 1981).

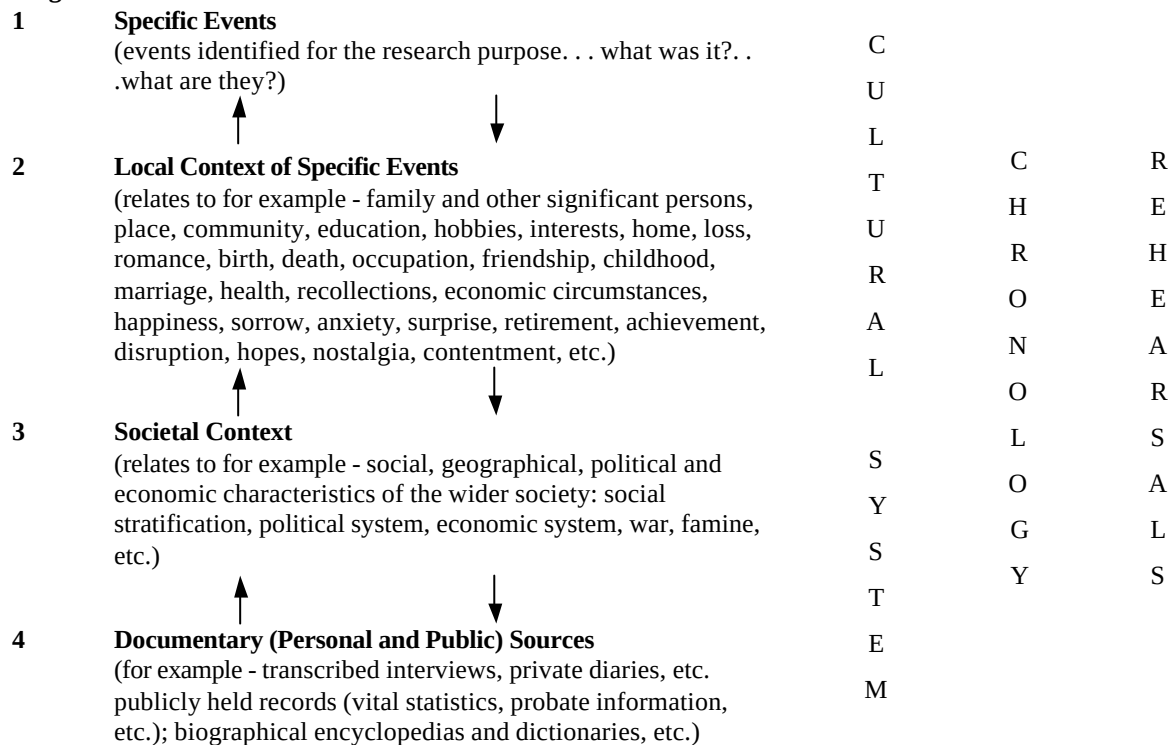
An outline of the points that the biographical researcher will need to consider may be represented diagrammatically (Figure 1.1). The diagram indicates a number of stages that any biographical research is likely to consider important in understanding subjects. The term Specific Events is used to describe those events (which may include thought-events) which can be said to provide the researcher with an initial purchase upon the research aims. The term Specific Events is related and embraces Denzin's term Epiphany, but does not necessarily need to be interactional, nor completely momentous (Denzin, 1989). Specific Events are times in a subject's life when they focus upon (reflectively or interactionally) a line of thought that relates to the aims of the research being carried out.

The first of the three columns on the right hand side of Figure 1.1 (Cultural System) refers to the necessity for locating the information gathered in points one to four to ambiances of changing values that are themselves constitutive of selfhood. The second column (Chronology) refers to the dates of important and influential public events that will have a shaping influence on the studied lives (e.g. National Service, the 11+, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the contraceptive pill). This column is a reminder that the cultural takes place in particular and identifiable historical time. The first and second columns together alert the researcher that as Lavagatto says, 'time, lived histories, political decisions, and people's habits create an accumulation of historical interventions and cultural usages' (Lambard, 1994, p. 4). The third column (Rehearsals) refers to the reconsideration and refining by the researcher of all the preceding data assembled in the four stages. The arrows between the stages are to indicate that any qualitative research diagram can only be a sensitizing device and that in reality discrete events (from the personal to the international) cannot, in terms of selfhood, be experienced either separately or abstractly. Differing parts of the schema will receive differing emphases dependent upon the nature of the particular research, but all areas will, to some extent, need to be addressed.

For research with a small sample, primarily employing interviews as an approach that deals separately with issues of class, gender, deviance, etc. may prove too categorical an approach for an understanding of the meaning brought to personal accounts. That these issues have influence is beyond question, but the way they may be said to go towards constituting a subject is certain to be myriad (Dilthey, 1961; Sartre, 1971). The biographical subject will always blur the boundaries between the abstract notion of a unique self and the abstract notion of a group identity. Far from being a methodological stumbling block there is here recognition that the self is constituted in the indissolubility of ego and sociality. This indissolubility will take a unique form for any given biographical subject. It is in the delineation of such forms that plausible depictions of individuals can be portrayed. However, what is not being suggested here is that thematic, analytical argument relating to established sociological categories is ultimately precluded. In the general discussion around, and consequent upon, the full data, these categories (social class, deviance, gender, etc.) will offer themselves for comment and interpretation. This can often be a pertinent result of biographical research, for as Ferraroti reminds us 'the effort to understand a biography in all its uniqueness [is also] an effort to interpret a social system' (1981, p. 22).

Figure 1. 1 Stages in biographical research

Stages



What may after some initial examination strike the researcher investigating especially by interview - the biographies of individuals or small groups is that the distinction between hermeneutics (where the emphasis is on the exegetical interpretation of the data) and phenomenology (where the emphasis is on the establishment of subjects' meanings) will not hold. It is possibly useful to suggest a combination of a variety of hermeneutics (most readily identified with Gadamer and Ricoeur) and the sociological phenomenology most associated with Weber in the method of Verstehen. To prevent confusion this approach could be referred to as verstehen hermeneutics in order to highlight the fact that the explication of subjects' meanings are considered within a hermeneutical perspective. Thus, the information gained through phenomenological analysis is added to the other, accumulated biographical data to form the overall text for interpretation. The only ultimate safeguard of the validity of such a verstehen hermeneutics (along with many kinds of qualitative research) is, of course, good faith and recognizable methodological consistency. This is to say no more than that such a procedure operates in a manner common to most forms of sophisticated cultural evaluation. While hermeneutics has traditionally been employed in the areas of aesthetics and theology it can be used in biographical research to explore (via a broadening of its empirical range through phenomenology) the meanings of 'unremarkable' lives. The authenticity of any piece of biographical research will therefore have its interpretations judged in relation to its degree of internal analytical coherence, referential adequacy and instrumental pertinence.

The complexity of an individual's position in society should, not even for a modest research exercise, be simplified too much. The researcher must attempt to maintain the complexity of a life alongside the research aims. In recent times Sartre has done more than most biographical researchers to stress this point - both in terms of methodology and description - in his own extensive biographical work. Sartre employs the term totalization. The initial totalization is the researcher's current understanding of an act, phenomenon, event or life. This current totalization on further analysis will lose some of its validity and become absorbed into a second totalization and so on. Laing and Cooper summarize the process thus: a totalization 'is negated as an absolute, conserved as a relative, subsumed in a synthesis and so on' (Laing and Cooper, 1971, p. 13). The way to understand lives for Sartre is through these successive acts of totalization. This point is related to the earlier method provided in the diagram of research procedure (Figure 1.1).

In his work on Flaubert, Sartre attempts to show the process of successive totalizations in order to demonstrate to his reader his methodological procedure while simultaneously attempting biographical description. He attempts to individualize social analysis while employing the seemingly supra-individual methods of the

Hegelian dialectic and Marxist materialism. In so doing he uncovers in these methods a deficiency - they have no compass to explain the variety of convoluted ways in which proximate individual lives are both similar and dissimilar, they have no hierarchy of mediations. As Sartre observes: while Valéry was unquestionably a petit-bourgeois intellectual not every petit-bourgeois intellectual was Valéry. In other words, socio-economic features are inescapable and causal but so too are specific inter-subjective socializing relations.

Biographical investigation must involve the continual examination of the interplay of family, primary group, community and socio-economic forces. To explore one without the others is to impoverish interpretation. Nonetheless, it is legitimate to accent or stress a single feature rather than another to uncover a particular route into a life. Deciding upon the appropriateness of which features to accent or stress among those composing the nexus of social structure and individual identity is at the methodological heart of biographical analysis,

for a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a singular universal; having been totalized and therefore universalized, by his epoch, he retotalizes his epoch by reproducing himself into it as a singularity. He is thus at once universal by way of the singular universality of human history, and singular through the universalizing singularity of his projects - he requires to be studied from both perspectives simultaneously. (Sartre, 1971, p. 7-8) [our translation]

As such, while the researcher must contextualize lives within economic conditions, they must also seek to comprehend their specificity. There are too many random features (some of them pre-linguistic) in human upbringing and socialization for particularity not to be characteristic of selves: economic circumstance and genetic predisposition will only ever be part determinants of individual identity. What Sartre calls the internal colouration of individual expectation will always be unique. The interview text is of particular interest to the biographical researcher because it is a specific kind of evidence. In itself it is an objectification of the subject, but has its roots in the life of the subject and it illuminates the life of the subject. However, the context of the subject and information from the subject need to be permanently cross-referenced, but cross-referenced with an objective - that objective being the purpose of the research, without which investigations would remain amorphous and pointless. In such cross-referencing - in relating context to, for example, interview material there may be observed tensions between individual aspirations and conditioning circumstances - these tensions are [likely to be a useful source of data for the researcher to offer a commentary upon.

It may be observed that biographical researchers should be aware that there is a far greater similarity between existentialist research procedures and grounded theory approaches than is usually observed. Many of the positions advanced by Sartre can be allied to the qualitative methodology first proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In fact if biographical researchers go even further back they will notice in relation to the study of lives echoes, commonalities and affinities between the work of the early Chicago School (particularly as represented by Cooley), the movement of European phenomenology first propounded by Husserl and the school of biographical hermeneutics inaugurated by Dilthey. One of the virtues of biographical research is that it is possibly more able than some other areas to make manifest the methodological connections between research approaches that have sometimes seemed to have little in common. While, in keeping with earlier comments, a standard research method for biographical investigation cannot be proposed it can nevertheless be suggested, especially in relation to research involving the in-depth study of small populations, that a combination of verstehen hermeneutics and grounded theory suggests itself as a highly fruitful research procedure.

Imagination

The majority of time spent in presenting qualitative research is not used in replicating data but in its interpretation. To perform this interpretation the researcher is required to employ imagination by which we mean the ability of mind to speculate upon and to link and assemble ideas related to the research text. Imagination is, here, stimulated into action by the research text - be that text; written, visual, numerical, audial, tactile or some combination of these things. Imagination is the vehicle the researcher employs to aid recognition of significant moments in the data, to relate these to each other and to the overall lives of the subjects under study. In other words imagination very often both fills the gaps within, and develops an architecture for, the research data. At all points, however, the researcher is required to fix imagination in empirical sources - it cannot be allowed free reign and take unwarranted liberties with the lives of subjects. The fact that biographical research findings are imaginative constructions does not mean that they need to be fictitious.

It is unfortunate that the employment of imagination has been played down or ignored in works on social science method. This is a profound mistake because it lies at the centre of qualitative interpretation and is so implicated in epistemology as to be of its essence: 'without it', says Kant 'we have no knowledge whatsoever'

(Kant, 1963, p. 103). Mary Warnock declares that 'one must recognise the universality of the imaginative function both in that it belongs to everyone and in that it is exercised by each over all his experience' (Warnock, 1976, p. 202). Similarly, as Hume makes clear, the power of the mind to employ imagination is a necessary, gestalt requirement in apprehending the features of the objective world. Imagination according to Hume can supply the connectedness between observations and features in the world (in this case the research text) that it would be impossible to prove by reason alone.

Reason can never show us the connection of one object with another. . . When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determined by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination. [our emphasis] (Hume, 1978, p. 92)

This point forcibly made by Idsme in giving imagination primacy in the understanding of others overrides for him in all practical matters his own philosophy of empirical knowledge. He argues as far as the self is concerned that there is no rational justification for the assumption that we have a personal identity. However, he also argues, most importantly, that such a philosophical position can only remain a philosophical position because, in fact, persons believe that they do have individual identity - i.e. selves. Further, he argues that we cannot live with ourselves, or each other but by having a conception of our selves and the selves of others. Our concept of our self is so powerful and permanent says Hume ('the liveliest impression imaginable,') that through it we are able, when given cues, to imagine the lives, sentiments and selves of others (Hume, 1978, p. 317). Hume refers to this ability as sympathy, which he argues is the necessary origin of all human relationships.

It is clear that Hume in using the term sympathy means the reconstructive imagination. He argues that,

no quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from or even contrary to our own. (Hume, 1978, p. 316)

Hume's argument proposes more than an ability to comprehend the feelings of others, it is rather an acknowledgment that a dialectic is set up between our subject and ourselves and that this dialectic deepens and becomes more informative (richer in data) the more purposefully we carry through the aim of our research. This in turn allows the imagination of the researcher to draw conclusions from data that are neither given directly in the data nor arrived at through numerical reasoning - in other words such conclusions are provided by imagination. For Hume this imaginative realm is at its most informative when it is contained and controlled by an empirical referent, by being concerned with an examination of 'common life' (Hume, 1893, p. 162). For the biographical researcher even though the world of the subject may be different from their own there will be sufficient pointers to establish similarity and dissimilarity, and consequently appropriate adjustments to research method can be made and discussed. The importance of using imagination to formally comprehend the meanings of others and to organize that comprehension into a social scientific interpretation of the studied subject goes back to Vico. It was Vico who first called for a qualitative research enterprise where empirical evidence needed the indispensable and crucial accompaniment of imagination. This type of knowledge, claims Vico, is yielded by 'entering into the mental life of other cultures, into a variety of outlooks and ways of life which only the imagination makes possible' [our emphasis] (Berlin, 1976, p. xix). With recourse only to positivist techniques for analyzing empirical evidence there is no relaying by researchers of subjects' intellect and feeling combined (Berlin, 1990).

Given the complexity of lives it is all the more important that imagination is employed in the interpretation of such sociological data. In examining the texts of our subjects (be they transcribed interviews, tape recordings, diaries, or similar) the researcher is in a sense contracted to join what we may call an aesthetico-imaginative pact. In writing up accounts of lives in terms of imaginative fidelity the researcher is employing methods akin to aesthetic reasoning: the category of the aesthetic becomes a resource through which the research texts disclose the feelings and meanings of subjects. Kant in the Critique of Judgment distinguishes between determining judgment (based on logical, general rules) and reflective judgment (based on rules developed from specified particulars). This latter, reflective judgment, requires the same processes as aesthetic apprehension and can 'give rise to new rules by generating new forms of synthesis' (Bowie, 1997, p. 112). For Hume, imaginative fidelity is at the heart of reason itself. To paraphrase him we may say that when we contemplate a biographical research text the vividness and intensity that we may note within it gains such concentration from the purpose of the research and the refining mechanisms we employ to make it aesthetico-imaginatively comprehensible (Hume, 1978). By having a purpose in analysing the research text the researcher sufficiently charges it with meaning to allow analysis. The protocols needed to prevent this imaginative engagement from slipping its explanatory

anchor and becoming just fantasy must be its relation to the certainty of the empirical - namely the fact that our subjects exist.

As researchers deliberate upon the life-accounts that is their data they sometimes share a method of analysis similar to that employed by literary analysis (sympathy, speculation and critical distance) in the understanding of fictional lives (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994). The fact that our research data do not necessarily form a neat, completed, unfragmented unit is entirely acceptable, just as it would be in the accounts of selves represented by a Hamlet, an Ophelia, a Lady Dedlock or a Molly Bloom. Thus manifold explanations both by single researchers or a number of researchers examining the same data are acceptable provided that the purpose of the research is central, and that data are judged through general analytical coherence, internal referential adequacy and instrumental utility (Waller, 1970). In recognizing that the aesthetico-imaginative as a mode of analysis has concerned itself with areas of investigation not open to the evaluative procedures of formal logic the specific strength of the category becomes clear: it can discuss texts in terms of their self-referring features having relation to issues beyond the texts other than by a quantitative link, but by the veracity of it being known that such matters have had, and are likely to have, general significance. We would not wish to argue that examining research texts is primarily a matter of aesthetic judgment - but rather that something of the aesthetic is involved in the imaginative recreation of the quotidian. This conclusion goes some way to address a gap in the qualitative literature concerning the connection between highly focused, small-scale data and wider social issues. Additionally, as Ricoeur argues, it is not a problem that the lives we study and examine should remain ambiguous, mysterious, discordant and confused. It is in recognizing this situation in our subjects and in ourselves, says Ricoeur, that we admit an aestheticized and deepened appreciation of the unknowable (Ricoeur, 1988). The researcher in an attempt to approximate the lives of others makes that which can never be fully understood part of a comprehensible mode of enquiry.

It is the case that imaginative reflection upon the research text and beyond form a necessary part of qualitative analysis. However, the data should not be endlessly analysed because a formal, research project must have time-specified limits. It will often be the case that more can be said, but this is as true of quantitative research as of qualitative work. Just as with basic data collection, if the amount of imaginative speculation required strays well beyond the objectives of the research, then the research has been inadequately designed. It is legitimate when imagining what it would be like to be somebody else, or imaginatively constructing a collage of their reflections, attitudes and life-events to set limitations upon how far such research should go. As has been argued earlier, biographical research data do not claim, or seek the impossibility of the exact replication of a life, the requirement is that the research refer to lives in such a way as to illuminate them in relation to a research objective.

Narrative

It has been argued that the formal particularities of analysis and imaginative engagement are necessary features of biographical research. However, both of these, importantly, can only be employed in relation to the recognition that lives are lived through time and are made intelligible by being composed of narratives. This may at first seem obvious until it is recognized that in attempting to understand the doings of selves narrative has been largely ignored by both social science and philosophy. In social science lives have often been segmented to such a degree that the overall, narrative life has quite simply dissolved (MacIntyre, 1985). Similarly, in philosophy, meanings derived from the conceptualization of actions have more often than not been divorced from the chronological settings in which they occurred (MacIntyre, 1985; Ricoeur, 1992). For biographical research, time and its passage must be seen as the inescapable feature of human life. The fact that lived time is finite and that our subjects (and we ourselves) have been born and will die is the backdrop against which all life is lived. In short, a life that is studied is the study of a life in time. Further, human beings have a sense of time as an essential part of their mental constitution: persons cannot be cognizant without a sense of occurrences preceding the present or a sense that occurrences will follow what is immediate. Such temporal awareness - accounts of happenings in time - is, as Mink remarks, 'a primary and irreducible form of human comprehension' (Mitchell, 1981, p. 252). In short, human identity is narrational, lives being composed of the narratives by which time is experienced.

These narratives (whether past, present or future) are the cohering mechanisms that make up comprehensible human experience. As such narrative analysis, more intricately than any other method, is able to weave social context and individual life together. It is the surest method of avoiding swamping the personal or subjectivizing the social. This does not mean that the findings of an analysis will be a perfectly replicated life but rather that the project is a serious matter, involving detailed empirical findings, imaginative reconstruction, a sense of history, observations upon morality and the exegesis of everyday existence. Additionally, these features

constantly remind the researcher that they themselves are in a sequence of predecessors, contemporaries and successors: that their temporary existence is inexplicable (both institutionally and personally) without a connection (material, cultural and ideological) with their predecessors, and that, once they are dead, so it will be for their institutional and personal successors. If this is true of the researcher it is true, too, of the researched subject and as such deepens the biographical research enterprise.

The philosopher who has done most to stress the importance of narrative for the understandings of lives is, as has been indicated, Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur is particularly significant for biographical research because he offers, through the concept of narrative, a resolution to a problem central to sociology and social psychology namely where does individual volition end and societal influence begin. Ricoeur's answer is that both are joined, indissolubly, in the narrative characteristics of human identity and that to attempt their separation is to do methodological and symbolic violence to the understanding of lives. The main formulation of Ricoeur's is that time is 'the structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity' and that narrativity is 'the language structure that has time as its ultimate referent' (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 169). In other words Ricoeur is saying that time is the universal, defining architecture of human existence and that it may only be made comprehensible in terms of narratives. Given that these narratives are inseparably composed of individual volition and social context the research will 'find' the researched life in a conflation of subjectivities and social structure.

Ricoeur characterizes the accounts people provide for themselves of their own lives as *emplotment* (*mise en intrigue*). That is, individuals create plots for themselves out of occurrences in their own lives in order to manage the process of living: they configure a series of events, a chronicle, into the storied nature of selfhood. As such they select from a bewildering array of actions and events those that can compose a sustainable narrative of themselves. In Hayden White's words, to *emplot* is to, 'effect a mediation between events. . . and the human experiences of temporality' (White, 1991, p. 144). It is these acts of *emplotment* and the consequent plots that the researcher must engage with. The researcher, in effect, is required to devise a plot to communicate with the plot of the subject. Researchers' plots will no doubt be constructed of individual reasoning, personal interest and employ 'the techniques of analysis developed by the social sciences of their own time to identify the social forces at work in the [subject's] milieu' (White, 1991, p. 145). The researcher, it can be said, redescribes through *emplotment* the plots of the subject. Biographical research, therefore, regards accounts of lives as allegories of temporality - allegories grounded in empirical fact and employing imaginative reconstruction. It is a palimpsestic process in which the researcher reconfigures the texts of others in terms of a research goal, the authenticity for which is judged by the protocols (scientific or imaginative) sanctioned by the research community.

The biographical researcher is adding to the study of groups a sociology of the individual. The formulation, 'a sociology of the individual' may seem tautologous but as Wilhelm Dilthey early observed, socio-historical reality can be captured and interpreted through an account of that highly singular and complex repository of the cultural - the single person. There have been many instances over the years in the sociology of education in which social divisions and their influences have been theorized, researched, presented and commented upon (e.g. Halsey et al. eds (1961 and 1997)). There is, for example, a good deal of evidence that children of lower working-class homes perform less well at school than children from comfortable upper middle-class homes. This we can say is a finding from empirical, quantitative investigation. The complementary results of biographical research will refer to what is unavailable in the quantitative research - that is, how individuals experience the objectively structuring, empirically observable features that place them historically where they are. The experience found in such narratives is likely to be complex. There will be some similarity between subjects, nonetheless, it will be noticeable that no two narratives will be the same. However, this individuality, far from being atomistic allows us to deepen our knowledge of the surrounding social context. The matter is then one of complexity rather than simplicity and the nature of the complexity is 'found in the lack of separation between the inner and the outer, between the interiority of selfhood and the social determination of selfhood' (Erben, 1996, p. 168). The resultant character of this world is expressed in the actions and thoughts through which subjects construct their lives - both within themselves and interactively. As Macmurray points out, not only is the biographical subject a performer of its own thoughts and actions but, further, that such performances constitute the process that make thoughts and actions *per se* possible.

The Self [the performer of thoughts and actions] is a term whose function is to represent the subject as the object of thought. It is at once a singular and a general term. As singular, it is the unitary centre of all possible experience. At the same time it is a general term [and] becomes the name of something we all possess in common. The Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that is it has its being in its relationship; [but] this relationship is necessarily personal. (Macmurray, 1991, p. 17-19)

Additional, highly influential echo, of the work on biographical identity represented by Ricoeur and Macmurray is found in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In his highly influential treatise in moral philosophy, *After Virtue* MacIntyre devotes a chapter relating narrative to biographical identity and moral purpose (MacIntyre, 1985). This work serves as a further justification for the practice of biographical method. Like Ricoeur, MacIntyre argues for a concept of selfhood the 'unity of which resides in the unity of narrative that links birth to life and to death' and, further, that 'narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions' (MacIntyre, 1985, pp. 222 and 208). For the biographical researcher the axiom provided by MacIntyre is that the subject, the individual life, emerges in the dual nature of its distinctiveness (that is person A will never be person B) and its connectedness (person A can 'recognize' the narrative of person B).

It is the case that if an examined life is no longer composed of some form of recognizable narrative it is literally, not possible to be understood. As MacIntyre says, at such points those who are seeking to understand a particular life become 'both intellectually and practically baffled [because] the distinction between the humanly accountable and the merely natural has broken down' (1985, p. 209). Such a position of total estrangement can be observed in some varieties of mental illness, and may be seen in encounters with 'alien cultures or even other social structures within our own culture' (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 120). Although it is likely that the researcher will most frequently choose research subjects who evidence certain kinds of recognizable narratives it is still, nonetheless, the case as MacIntyre indicates that they, like us, are constrained by social circumstance: 'We enter upon a stage we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making' (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 213). The fact that we, and our subject, are constituted as story telling creatures is not, of itself, any guarantee that such stories will be harmonious. MacIntyre reminds the researcher forcibly that while narratives are always conceptually teleological they are also, as lived out in lives, often accompanied by empirical unpredictability. And yet this unpredictability can still, generally, allow both the interpreter and interpreted to share some recognition of fundamental narrational similarity, whether it be related to the mundane and instrumental or the momentous and highly emotional. It is to emphasize this point that MacIntyre quotes Barbara Hardy thus, 'we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn and love by narrative' (Hardy, 1968, p. 5).

It is now clear that in biographical research a variety of techniques gathered from the various disciplines of the social sciences and humanities may be used to look at those complex events called lives. Ricoeur stresses the importance of always subverting the deification of any single disciplinary method with those of other disciplines. The researcher in biographical studies in calling upon a wide range of analytical perspectives is likely, in studying selves, to be constantly reminded that they are not in a closed circle of interpretation. Further, biographical research in not attempting a forensic separation of social structure from subjectivity discloses the researched life or lives as coming about as a network of meanings (emerging from a collage of beliefs, behavioural practices and documentary records) the interpretation of which the researcher is advantageously and ethically implicated within. It is by researchers specifying their research purpose and the scope of their research that they will find appropriate methods suggesting themselves. This will be so whether the entire research text is a paragraph of interview transcription or a systematic, large-scale survey. No matter what the range of the data and no matter which shade of interpretation the researcher wishes to accent or develop they will nonetheless need to employ, to varying degrees, empirical information, imaginative reconstruction and narrative analysis.

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