

## Editor's Introduction: Researching Lives and the Lived Experience

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

The idea that individual lives and lived experience has a major contribution to make to the understanding of the social world is not a particularly new one. In the interwar period, the now classic study by W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, conducted in the 1920s, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (republished in 1958), established an interest in life experience data, in this case what can be described as autobiographical accounts of polish peasants migration experiences as revealed in letters, including a detailed life history of one of these. For Thomas and Znaniecki, both the individual and the social were crucial elements in any study of social life, in this case understanding migration and social/cultural change. In addition, in this period, there were evaluations of both the life history method (Dollard, 1935) and the use of personal documents in social science research (Allport, 1942 and Gottschalk, Kluckhohn, and Angell 1942), which included assessments of Thomas and Znaniecki's work followed by a further assessment by Herbert Blumer in 1939 (see Plummer, 2001, Chapter 5 for full discussion).

The work of Thomas and Znaniecki was an important precursor to another interwar development – the work of ‘The Chicago School’. Under the tutelage of Robert Park and Edward Burgess in the Sociology Department at Chicago (along with scholars in related institutes and departments), there was a commitment not only to understanding the broad character of the urban condition, by using the more traditional quantitative demographic and survey methods, but also to more microanalyses of the culture or perhaps more correctly urban subcultures, through detailed ethnographic fieldwork, and to a detailed exposition of individual lives and case studies as providing insight into those who are part of that urban landscape. Howard Becker [1] has described this use of the life history approach, in particular Clifford Shaw’s study of *The Jack Roller* (1931) as part of a ‘scientific mosaic’ a metaphor for seeing how different parts combine to form whole patterns within urban life. Moreover, this kind of commitment to a methodological plurality and for micro-analyses in particular was associated with a major new theoretical development in sociology and social psychology; that of symbolic interactionism, in which Herbert Blumer was an important figure (see Plummer [2]) whose concerns with identity, action, and interaction have been seen to lie at the core of life story work in European social theory also (Kohli, 1981).

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

We have come to see that the biographies of men and women, the kinds of individuals they variously become, cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieux of their everyday life are organised (p. 175).

Second, the influence of the Chicago School tradition of life story and detailed case studies continued post-war, from the 1960s on, with what some would describe as a more populist tradition of in-depth case studies such as Oscar Lewis’ *Children of Sanchez* (1961) on poverty and family life in Mexico; in the many works of Studs Terkel in the United States

(see, for example, *Hard Times*, 1970 and *Working*, 1974) involving reportage (with little analysis or comment) of extensive recorded conversations with people about aspects of their lives: and by Tony Parker in the UK who similarly published a number of individual life stories of what might be described as the 'underclass' in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. *The Courage of his Convictions*, 1962, *The Twisting Lane*, 1965).

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

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

The new concern, which oral history encompassed, was with remembering the past; whatever the particular topic that was of interest to the researcher. It was to explore how people experienced or connected with the past, how they viewed themselves as actors within particular historical and social contexts, and how the past was part of individual lives in the present. At this stage, there was little theorising of the concept of

memory. Indeed the activity of remembering and its consequences for data, was to come later when most of the approaches to life story research began to explore what was a fundamental aspect of the data produced by their research participants (see, Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003; Green [26]).

The second of these influences was the development of second wave feminism from the 1970s and along with it feminist scholarship which sought to provide a corrective to what was viewed as male-dominated modes of practice and ways of thinking. An important aspect of early feminist scholarship, as with oral historians, was a project to make the 'invisible' visible. Defining what this project involved epistemologically and in practice occupied numerous feminist scholars over the next decades (for example, Harding, 1986; Smith, 1987; Roberts, 1981; and Stanley and Wise, 1983). A key element of this reworking of feminist methodologies was the emphasis on 'first-hand' experiences, on personal understanding and on situating women's lives within an oppressive social system. Within this context, women scholars also began to look at constructing 'stories' of their own lives and personal histories (see, for example, Steedman [7], hooks [8], and Lorde, 1984). Swindells (1995) has drawn attention to the autobiographical tradition within the British feminist movement from the 1970s, emphasising the extent that these were political statements based on personal testimony revealing collective conditions of oppression, where the writing and the reading were forms of consciousness raising offering the possibility for change. Similarly others at this time, and later, used photographic projects to explore personal experience (Spence, 1986; Martin and Spence, 1987) and to use photographic mediums as an element of auto/biographical projects (Walkerdine, 1985; Kuhn, 1995). Undoubtedly, many feminist scholars also found autobiographical approaches to research and writing more rewarding personally, and to be more in sympathy with political commitments to non-hierarchical ways of being and doing. In addition, as feminist scholarship developed the genre of life writing across a number of disciplines, it became a genre that could be studied its own right, and feminists began to analyse the variety of ways in which the lives of women could be revealed and analysed in the past and present. Increasingly, feminist scholars studied letters Jolly [48] Stanley [29], diaries, Cooper, (1987) Stanley [50] and biographies of other women, and constructed new biographies Lyon (2000) and [69]. For feminists, the 'I' of the self was indicative of their own reflexivity and the possibility of writing not just about others but also themselves. Stanley (1993), a leading exponent of auto/biography in the UK, has stressed the importance of these elements in feminist scholarship as defining the set of practices and methodological procedures that is auto/biography. Subsequently feminists have taken auto/biographical research and writing to further develop

the relationship of feminist epistemology and feminist politics to forms of autobiographical or life writing (see, for example, Smith [18]; Stivers [12]; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Smith and Watson, 1998; Cosslett et al., 2000).

The third influence was also to be found as part of the concerns of the first two, and similarly had its roots in political struggle around racism, discrimination, and oppression, in many cases linked with colonialism and/or imperialism. Early on in the feminist movement and then in scholarship, the category 'woman' itself became contested and difference emerged as a major corrective in the aim to understand the diversity of lives. Class, 'race', nationhood, sexuality, and able-bodiedness were explored, and seen to be as integral as gender in individual identity formation and the sense of self, as well as systems of oppression on a global scale. The position of different women was problematised, both within 'western' cultures and their disadvantaged position within less developed countries began to be explored. Civil rights and anti-racist movements also fed into scholarship that challenged traditional categories and modes of practice within numerous disciplines, transversing the social sciences and humanities. Just as the feminist movement had given rise to 'women's studies' and then 'gender studies' as distinct interdisciplinary fields, so too did 'black studies', particularly in the United States, with a growth in autobiographical accounts of lives historically situated and in the present, such as the work of Maya Angelou, Zora Neal Thurston, and b. hooks. Critical attention was increasingly given to concepts of 'colour', 'race', and 'ethnicity' in relation to identities in general and within autobiographical writing specifically (Perkins, 2005). Within this third influence, I would also include the development and increasing number of life stories and research on genocide, particularly the Holocaust. This has occurred globally, since survivors of the Holocaust and post-holocaust generations are to be found in a number of countries (see Freedman [81]), with German scholars also addressing this aspect of their own history (Rosenthal, 1991). Later we would see this tradition of revealing the consequences of extreme forms of violence and oppression in new venues for similar story-telling; the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in East Germany and South Africa for example (Andrews, 2007: Chapter 5 & 6), genocide in Rwanda (Dona, 2007), and generally in human rights campaigns (Schaffer and Smith [42]).

Outside of these three general influences on the growth of interdisciplinary life story research, there is one other important historical social science tradition that developed in the interwar period that needs brief mention here. The Mass-Observation project in the UK, under the leadership of Tom Harrison, began collecting accounts from a panel around people's everyday lives several times over a year. They would be free to provide open-ended answers to a number of 'directives' or topics. It was

to provide an archive (now based at the University of Sussex) of contemporaneously generated autobiographical accounts. While there have been critics of the archive's material (similar to those who generally treat non probability sampled individual cases and selected life stories with some scepticism), those who have worked closely with the archive as well as the more recent openness to and theorisation around life story work have generated an interest in such collections of personal documents. (for a discussion of M-O, see Sheridan [36] and Thomson, 1995). Furthermore, this tradition of proactive collection of life story data has continued under the leadership of Paul Thompson and others, providing sound recordings of both present and past life experiences in the British Sound Archive.

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

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

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

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

distinct, but more because together they indicate the importance hereon of language, accounts and narratives, self and subjectivity, and individual lives and their cultural contexts as revealed by life story research.

### Recent Developments and Trends

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

One particular strand of more recent auto/biographical approaches has been auto-ethnography. As with pioneering feminist research, which sought to put the researcher's self into both knowledge production and data, so too does auto-ethnography. Here again we see the post-modern emphasis on 'constructed' accounts and 'constructed' realities in which the boundaries of the social science researcher and the research participant(s) become blurred so that research texts are a mixture of personal self-analysis with academic work. Essentially, auto-ethnography took the ethnographer's 'insider' status and knowledge a step further than the traditional exhortations that involvement was a necessary condition of long-term naturalistic field work; to the development of more reflexive accounts. By the late 1980s, reflexivity took a more systematic approach to the exploration of self-knowledge and experience as part of the analysis and writing up of field work experiences and to a consideration that this should also be part of the data to be analysed. These constitute personal narratives in their own right. Reed-Danahay (1997) posits that auto-ethnography features variable emphases on the research process, culture, and the self, but the researcher/authors own experience, self/other interactions in culture are always present. Many auto-ethnographers have also used this technique to ethnographically explore aspects of their own experience, such as bullying (Vickers, 2007), racism and discrimination (Miller, 2007), and illness (Ettore, 2005).

More recently, some developments within psychoanalytic research, based on detailed analysis of the single case, or a very small numbers of cases, with this case material also presenting a narrative quality, share something with traditions of life story research, and some life story researchers have equally begun to draw on psychoanalytic conceptual and theoretical tools, to help in the interpretation of both lived experience and the nature of narrative itself (for example, Holloway and Jefferson [54]). Narrative researchers have also been interested in the unwritten and untold stories that have been lived, but remain at the level of the unconscious or memory, but in this sense it is cultural memory and cultural history that is of interest (Freeman, 2002). Doing this kind of narrative work requires moving beyond personal experiences to those shared with others in time and place. At this time narrative research, encompassing personal narratives, is developing apace, but as Smith (2007) has argued, whilst there are commonalities in the view that narratives are personal and also social, produced in social interaction, and have important social functions in that they do things, 'narrative inquiry is a field characterised by tensions and connections, differences and similarities and contrast and disparity' (p. 392). He, like Becker [1], uses the metaphor of a mosaic, to characterise the many different kinds of empirical enquiry, methods, and theoretical preoccupations of researchers who are interested in narrative.

Finally, in this section, it is recognised that there are possibilities for life story researchers to study lives using new sources of data as well as new technologies, expanding the sites for where we can find evidence of storied lives. In these volumes, I have included a number of examples of such sources, such as tattoos [37], lonely hearts columns [35], CVs [34], alongside more traditional written and visual resources. New mediums of communication such as video [51, 65], digital media [13], and internet sites, along with homepages (Kennedy, 1999) and blogging, also offer ways of studying lives with new challenges that accompany the different mediums, audiences, and contexts of production. Artistic productions and performance are now also viewed as a rich source of autobiographical work as the text edited by Smith and Watson (2002) exemplifies. Thus the means by which lives become accessible to the researcher offers at this point in time endless possibilities and potential.

### **What Is Life Story Research?**

Above I alluded to the broad definition of life story research taken in these volumes. There are some who argue for the distinctiveness of each of these, and while there may be particular features of these different approaches, arguably their distinctiveness is less when we examine actual

practice. The use of life stories in social science research takes as a starting point that story-telling and self-presentation is something which occurs as part of everyday social practices in any case, and these may be both private or public (perhaps more often semi-public) in nature. This has led life story researchers to consider the way that experience is 'narratively and dialogically organised' (Cosslett et al., 2000:3). Thus all research approaches which orient themselves to such stories and self-revelation share at least an epistemological orientation to individual lives and experiences and the subjectivity elicited through these methods of enquiry. That said, there are of course some differences in definition or practice and this section will explore some of these differences as well as similarities.

The life history and oral history method were pioneers in developing the idea that in-depth interviews with single individuals were to be standard practice. Stanley (1994: 89) has suggested it is this reliance on a single method, that is one of the distinguishing features of oral history compared to auto/biography, while the latter is also less 'programmatically based' and multi-disciplinary. On the other hand, both are concerned with 'the political ramifications of the shifting boundaries between self and other, past and present, writing and reading, fact and fiction, and with an analytic attention to these within the oral, visual, and written texts that are 'biographies and autobiographies' (ibid.). Taking up these points Bornat [14; 2001] has discussed some of the similarities and differences between oral history, reminiscence, and auto/biographical approaches. She argues that there is a difference which lies in how each is used, in that theorising is a means in oral history, a goal in auto/biography [14, p. 19]; and the research relationship in oral history is more interrogative shaped by interview traditions, and their more short-term nature, as distinguishable from textual interrogation in auto/biography. Finally, she argues they each have different aims and while both can claim their aims are political there is a greater instrumentality and concern for outcomes within oral history. Bornat sees oral history as a self aware practice that is committed to explanation and change (p. 25). It is in telling about life experiences that forms of personal and social transformation are possible. Auto/biographical and narrative researchers, however, would not always accept that instrumentality. Some proponents of autobiographical approaches who would want to make the same claim, that their work too goes beyond the boundaries of the text and speaks to wider audiences than academic social scientists and literary theorists, and that this work still retains a position which aims at inclusivity. Most feminist practitioners would do so for example. Others, such as Atkinson and Delamont [21] however, caution that political/moral evaluations can undermine academic credibility, if that is the principal audience for this work.

There is another view of how such differences in approach work: that is between oral texts and written texts. It can be argued that the many auto/biographical texts researchers utilise in their work have already been through a number of 'creative' processes in their making, and that written texts in general are more manipulated and controlled compared to an oral performance which emerges as unedited and sometimes unprocessed (Etter-Lewis, 1993). But equally oral accounts or stories can be seen as active reconstructions of lives, experiences, and sense of self, constituted in the telling and the re-telling. The interactive nature of oral discourse may mean that it is possible to interrogate meaning in the immediate context of the telling; but interrogation by researchers and a relationship between the researcher's self and the other is essential to both.

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

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

### **Theorising Lives**

There has been some criticism levelled at life story approaches in the social sciences for what has been viewed as an excessive individualism, not recognising that it is in understanding how individuals construct meaning that then provides us with knowledge of how social reality is itself constructed. This focus on individual subjects might be argued to move us far away from concerns with social context; societal structures and institutions which have traditionally been seen as crucial determinants

of individual actions and outcomes. Theoretically, a focus on the agency of individuals has been important to life story researchers, but this has not necessarily excluded contextual features. We have already seen above that the roots of oral history retained a concern with historical and social contexts, while also providing a corrective to a more traditional focus on structures, institutions, and processes at the societal and global level. There have been a number of researchers, committed to the use of different kinds of auto/ biographical methodologies, who have set out to argue, both theoretically and practically, for this human agency, but also that individual biographies, which initially might be seen as providing distinctive trajectories, strategies, and forms of identification, are the starting point to understanding how these are also contingent on time, space, and social structures in which they are located (see Rustin [11]; 2002). Equally, European biographical researchers (Apitzsch and Inowlocki, 2000) have stressed the embeddedness of the human case in macro-social structures and processes, and it was this, rather than interest in individuals per se, that directed their substantive investigations and ensuing theoretical models. This relationship was exemplified by the large-scale European-wide SOSTRIS (Social Strategies in Risk Societies) project, where the use of biographical methods enabled an analysis of the way in which individual cases can at the level of structure and within their social contexts be representative of how particular groups develop different strategic solutions and directions while sharing forms of social exclusion. Furthermore, it is often at the level of these important structural and institutional contexts that the differences across cultures can be theorised and seen as providing important policy dimensions (Chamberlayne, Rustin, and Wengraf, 2002). In a sense, this example takes us back to Becker's [1] original argument about the life history method, where the parts are studied in order to arrive at a greater comprehension of the whole. It is as Rustin [11: 48] argues, the 'individual case becomes the point of discovery and the starting point for inference about social structure'.

A second major theoretical focus for life story research has been a concern not so much with structure but with process, consistent with giving primacy to human agency and forms of reflexivity and self-identity construction within the time-dimensions of individual life-spans. It is the construction of biography; what Fischer-Rosenthal (2000) calls 'biographical work' that one conception of process occurs, and it is made available through the life story or narration. By these means individuals orient themselves to social and historical situations by means of recalling the past, interpreting past, and present, within the self and other relational contexts. In this way, life stories reveal processes of temporal ordering and differentiation; individual and social actions within and without the social networks of which s/he is a part. Fischer-Rosenthal (*ibid.*) also

considers that this dialogical and interactive work of biographical structuring lies at the heart of the individual society relationship in modernity; one that avoids the macro–micro distinction or that of ‘inner’ versus ‘outer’ lives, and consists, necessarily, of communicative story-telling that is interpretative, contingent, flexible, and transformative. It is how social order is achieved. A further aspect of this attention to process in context lies in the cultural locus from which the story derives its meaning. Cultural norms will also influence what Andrews (2007:33) refers to as the ‘tellability’ and ‘hearability’ of the participants’ accounts: establishing boundaries that determine what is, and what is not, told.

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

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

For life story researchers, both memory and time are taken as part of the programmatic of the process of constructing life story data. It is accepted that since life stories are constructed in the present, they will always be selective, partial, and subject to reinterpretation.

As Kuhn (1995:2) argues:

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

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

Theorists of time have emphasised that what is of interest to social scientists are the social meanings of time, or what Ricoeur referred to as 'human time'. It is not time as chronology, or in its calendric form that life story researchers find significant in their work, but rather time as a non-linear construction, often of moments, or fragments, which is how memory itself works with time. Time is therefore not fixed but interpreted, constructed through stories and narratives. For Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) human time is time revealed in narration. Thus, like identities,

narrativity and temporality are closely related. Such time will in this way be 'experienced time'. Biographical interviews, for example, that set out to collect a 'told story' do not require the life to begin or end at any particular point (see Breckner [53]). As with place, particular narratives will be elaborated and framed within time. Time, as Taylor and Wetherell [25] argue, is a resource which people use in order to construct the 'times' of their life; and equally, as in their research, time provides a resource to be drawn upon in constructing narratives of a nation (in this case New Zealand) in which personal narratives and individual lives can be situated. Time orientations in life story research are frequently to the past – in oral history in particular, but they can equally be to the present and the future. As Brockmeier [24] suggests, 'temporally distinct events and places become related in the back and forth movement between past, present and a future to which it is directed' (p. 54). In this sense, he argues, 'autobiographical time' is not about time but about times where forms, ordering, and modalities constantly change. As a consequence he identifies linear, circular, cyclical, spiral, static, and fragmentary times as models individuals use in their autobiographical narratives.

### **The Practice of Life Story Research**

In thinking about the ways in which we as researchers use life stories as research, it is useful to think first about whether we approach them as topic or resource. I have always found this distinction useful when thinking about different ways of doing research. Plummer (2001) also makes this distinction in his discussion of the diversity of life stories. Essentially, any method of enquiry can be used either as a resource, that is where it is a means of accessing data about a topic of enquiry, or it can be a topic, where the means is itself the focus of enquiry. For example, within oral or life history interviews, we may on the one hand use them to obtain data about all kinds of diverse topics in history, life, and culture, where the participants own experiences, interpretations and constructions of events, are combined with those of other individuals to build up a broader analysis. In this sense, the letters solicited by Thomas and Znaniecki (1934) were to provide the authors with experiences of Polish village life and social change from migration to a large American city. They can be a resource for studying 'subjectivity' and 'meaning' as Plummer (2001:39) asserts. If we were to treat these as topic, then we could, for example, use the data to examine biographical trajectories, or to analyse how people go about the task of constructing the past; or why they 'tell their story' in the way they do. The topic of lived time has also demonstrated how such research can open up more theoretical debates also, such as the 'meaning of biographical time' (see Freeman, 2002 and Brockmeier [24]). In all

of the approaches to life story research discussed here and in these volumes, there are examples of both these ways of approaching data. Narrative researchers have been concerned to analyse genres of story telling especially in the context of understanding the role these stories have in the lives or particular experiences of respondents, where topic and resource interplay in illuminating ways (see, for example, Squire, 2007, in relation to HIV in Africa); or as Sclater [19:328] argues, we can distinguish between 'narrative as product' and the 'act of narration', a distinction which enables the researcher to consider both the storied construction of the self, as well as 'selves' or significant aspects of them, which will not be revealed by narratives alone.

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

### *Interviews*

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

their presentation in the present. (For a discussion of this method see Wengraf, 2001; Breckner [53].)

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

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

### *Personal Documents*

Following in the historical tradition of Thomas and Znaniecki, life story researchers have recognised the value of a variety of personal documents that reveal aspects of people’s lives, drawing on the idea that these can be a means by which participants can freely express and construct meaningful aspects of their lives. Included here are letters, diaries, journals, auto/biographies, memoirs (and photographs and paintings which are discussed below) existing or elicited. Important aspects to be considered in relation to existing documents are access and the conditions of their existence. Such documents are products of a number of social and cultural factors and changing historical contexts in which both the social practices of their production, available technologies, levels of literacy, and whether they are retained and archived and thence survive, are all significant. Feminist researchers in particular have pointed to power structures which have determined the production of material by and about women, and others (Erben [9]) have noted how individual biographies reveal status and power hierarchies not just of the life itself, but of the general experience of groups across the spectrum. Over and above these determining factors, life story researchers have to consider particular genres

of writing, particularly those associated with autobiographical and biographical writing, and as Thomas and Znaniecki discovered in letter writing, and which Stanley [29] and Jolly (2002 [48]) have drawn our attention to more recently. Literary genres are an important interpretative context and these include what it is possible to write about, thus directly influencing content as well as style. As Lyon (2000) points out in her biographical work on Alva Myrdal, in using biographical material as socially located interpretations 'there is no place for adjudication between different versions of events' (p. 411).

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

### *Visual Forms of Life Story*

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

chronicle her life, a life that was dominated by pain after a childhood illness and serious accident when she was eighteen.

The second example is photography. The interest in 'domestic' photography and family albums has been prompted in part because of their status as documentary material of people, lives, and relationships over time (Spence and Holland, 1991). An early theorist of the social significance of these photographic productions, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argued that photography was practiced and organised in socially regulated ways, and served important social functions of social integration and social exchange. As anyone who looks at their own or their family albums would find there are particular events and/or occasions for which there is a perceived need for photographs. For Bourdieu, family events, ceremonial occasions, and holidays are the basis for most photographic productions in everyday life. As such, while potentially everything can be photographed, not everything is, and this may pose some limitations on existing collections in terms of their value to the researcher. However, the potential for even limited and selective photographs to generate stories and narratives beyond the given image; and the possibility that new topics can be introduced at the instigation of researchers, then this limitation is not a serious one (Harrison, 1996). It has been my argument (Harrison [40]) that in the context of video diaries, life story interviews, or the eliciting of personal narratives using visual images, that images rarely 'speak' on their own. Verbal narration ultimately becomes the means by which the visual content before us becomes part of the story. Video diaries, and other photographic-based methods, for example, are nearly always accompanied by the diarist speaking, either on their own account or as directed by the researcher (Rich and Chalfen [65], Ramos [63]), although Langford (2001) has demonstrated how readings and interpretations of albums whose provenance is unknown, in that no-one is left to tell the tale, can be achieved through what she describes as an oral consciousness.

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

### **Research Contexts for Life Stories**

Here I explore some aspects of 'doing' life story research that are important research contexts within this tradition and which have been matters for debate. Many of these are ethical and political concerns that arise because of what might be seen as the deeply personal nature of the lives the researcher is interested in, and because of the relationships which

are seen as characteristic of this type of research. Some have arisen because of commitments to a different kind of social science knowledge that arose as a consequence of the relationship of knowledge production to the kind of social movements discussed earlier in this chapter.

Life story research requires the same adherence to ethical codes as any research does. It is not this per se that is the subject of debate. Generally speaking, life story research is overt, so it escapes the controversies surrounding covert approaches. However, while informed consent, at the core of overt approaches, is present, in many contexts of life story research the idea that privacy should be respected can be difficult to achieve in practice. This is in part because of whom it is that we wish to have data about, people whose status and activities are well known and identifiable, where anonymity can be compromised. Equally, persons who are not directly the 'subjects' of the research will be unknowingly brought into the data. In some cases lack of anonymity might not be an issue, as in Andrews (2007) work on political activists in East Germany and the UK, where at the outset it was recognised that the public nature of this activism was prescient. In other situations anonymity is not an issue, because it can be achieved in the same way as any other research that is not necessarily auto/biographical in orientation. The use of visual images provides additional issues of anonymity, although again it is possible to anonymise images. It can be the relational issues involved in doing life story work that cause researchers extensive reflection, including whether or not 'western' codes of ethics are applicable in other cultural or national contexts (Reissman [75]). Significant and intimate others are frequently part of stories, and in other situations participants become so over the course of a project, especially if there is longer-term field work involved (see, for example, Ellis [77]).

The often deeply personal nature of the data that is revealed in narrative, life story and life history interviews itself raises issues of potential trauma and its opposite with claims that such interviews are often therapeutic. Concern with not harming our research participants has been a paramount ethical concern, just as it is for bio and medical scientists. As Plummer (2001:224) points out 'life story research always means you are playing with another person's life'. In this the researcher has certain privileges, often closely linked to the feeling that they may be exploiting their research participants. It is not just in the collection that this problem occurs, but in writing and publication, which can impact further on life history participants and others who are part of their story. For those researchers who consider story-telling has 'therapeutic', curative or healing effects the opportunities provided to speak about and to share traumatic life events and experiences is emphasised. Rosenthal [85], in a very detailed exposition of this aspect of biographical work, suggests this effect may depend on whether the trauma was some time past or more

recent when there is a potential for re-traumatisation. In general, there is an opportunity to have suffering recognised and exclusion lessened, to speak about the previously unspeakable, and even the ability to speak to others beyond the interviewer (see also Rickards (1998) and Jones [83]). This paradox of potential for harm or healing seems to be one which life story researchers have to consider at the outset, and how far they delve in the process; it is part of a 'moral maze' of dilemmas and decisions for which there are no real prescriptions, although there are skills and empathetic sensibilities which can assist.

A further area discussed extensively within the literature is the nature of the research relationship. It has been accepted that all the approaches considered here involve two major departures from what traditionally was seen as a relationship of distance, and perhaps a hierarchical one also, between the researcher and the researched. Traditional positivist methodologies required some measure of researcher 'objectivity' for data to be valid, that is untainted by context or researcher influence. While this stance has been much criticised, even by some positivist researchers, this did not diminish the importance of detachment. The relationship that is emphasised, at least in research interviews designed to collect life story data, is, of necessity, considered to be a different one. Forming relationships, often claimed as between equals, is viewed as essential to the quality of data which emerges from the interview. Participatory and collaborative projects have emphasised this model of enquiry while also noting that there are compromises and consequences which follow (see, for example, Turnbull [78]). One such consequence is that a form of friendship develops, and this might be sustained over time by the researcher (see, Andrews, 2007), sometimes entwined with an ethical commitment that research relationships should not be exploitative with participants treated as a means to an end. Trust and being a confidant are aspects of this. The extent to which such equality and trust is possible is still under scrutiny and some (Zukas, 1993) have described such relationships as quasi-relationships given the degree to which researchers continue to direct the interviews and put limits on reciprocity.

One further aspect of the research relationship is the emphasis placed on reflexivity. Given the highly 'subjective' nature of the data and its collection, continual reflection by the researcher on the ways in which the relationship between researcher and participant(s) may impinge on the validity of the data is considered important. Thus reflexivity is an important corrective, although it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this will occur almost as a necessary condition of how the research proceeds and the researchers' commitments at the outset. Reflexivity is also a recognition that the researcher will be affected by what they see and hear. Even in approaches not reliant on an interview relationship, researchers have suggested that reading personal documents, for example, the ways

in which they are read and interpreted, will involve the researcher forming a relationship with the content of these data, where the researchers' lives become the basis for how others lives are viewed (see, for example, Stanley [50]), and the term auto/biography is sometimes used to draw attention to the connections between the researcher's autobiography and the biographies of those being studied). Cotterill and Letherby (1993) and Letherby and Ramsey (1999) have analysed this interweaving of personal auto biographies, their relationship with each other and research participants, insisting that these are relevant to the work they do as academics. As Sparkes (1994) argues, ethical aspects necessarily arise around the relationships of trust and collaboration between researcher and researched and in the life history context, there are issues of 'voice' as a life story transits to the life history. Increasingly the emotional dimension is analysed as an important element in the research process (see also Holland, 2007). Returning to C. Wright Mills (1970:216) view of 'intellectual craftsmanship' he stresses that we 'must learn to use your (our) lives in our intellectual work', since 'craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product you work on', and 'capturing experience' is a necessary guide to reflection.

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

Validity has traditionally referred to the extent that our data and analysis of it remain 'true' to some kind of underlying reality, and some forms of validity explicitly concern the degree to which the data may have been contaminated by the research process. From the discussion thus far, it is evident that such a conception of validity would pose considerable problems in the life story context. Life story researchers would want to claim that while accounts are context bound constructions, they enable us to access something other than myth and that they represent something other than fictional accounts. In fact, why would we as social scientists want to engage in something if it has no purchase on the human condition in all its diversity of contexts? Researchers have argued that using auto/biographical approaches are an important corrective to common categories and theorising in social science which traditionally has not been articulated in relation to those 'active agents' who occupy different positions and engage in diverse social relationships with people and things (see, for example, Henwood et al. 2001). In that sense we return to arguments that life story work can open up the possibility of more adequately understanding lives and contexts in which those lives are lived, including social structures, institutions, and broader social processes. As Polkinghorne [88] argues, 'narrative truths' are not 'historical truths' but provide evidence for personal meaning in response to life events and experiences which occur in context. While he suggests that there needs to be different protocols for assessing validity in what he terms 'reformist' social science, these still essentially involve intersubjective judgements and arguments within communities of practitioners that enable an assessment of the plausibility of the knowledge claims.

### Conclusion

The aim of this introduction has been to sketch out the broad field of life story research and to discuss developments, concepts, and theoretical interests as well as aspects of practice. As such it is hoped that what life story work can contribute to the social sciences is evident. In writing this introduction, I have endeavoured to cover the same themes, although not in detail, as the collected papers in this volume. There are five main sections within the four volumes: one tracing a history of life story work since the 1920s with developments from the 1980s making a major contribution. Then some of the theoretical and conceptual areas that are central to this kind of methodological commitment are considered followed by a section on the different types of life story research. This is then followed by two sections on what might be considered the practice and processes, including research contexts, of life story work. The papers were chosen not because of any judgements about whether or not they are 'the best in the field', although some no doubt are, but rather to

both ensure that readers are given a wide overview of the field, and also a sense of this form of practice as a global form. There are examples of researchers and/or research participants and settings from all the major continents and subcontinents, and it is evident that there is in life story research considerable potential to undertake further comparative work where we can come to understand both the unique as well as the common threads that people's lives in different contexts and at different times will reveal. For some researcher's, life story research is ideally suited to some of the common social phenomena of past and present times, such as migration for example (Thomson, 1999; Erel [56]) returning to the methodology's own roots in this topic. Where at all possible, therefore, I have tried to include examples of life story research or the spaces for life stories that do justice to its practice world-wide, its application to a variety of topics, and which also reflect the continued commitment to visibility, to voices that over time, and now, which in many societies and cultures have been marginalised. The limitation to mainly journal articles inevitably has resulted in little reference to many leading book length texts and edited collections that are generally more specialised than these volumes, and researcher's will pursue these according to their own interests and inclinations.

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

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