

# Biographical research

**BRIAN ROBERTS**

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This book is dedicated to Evan and Mary for life,  
care and memories

Open University Press  
Celtic Court  
22 Ballmoor  
Buckingham  
MK18 1XW

email: enquiries@openup.co.uk  
world wide web: www.openup.co.uk

and  
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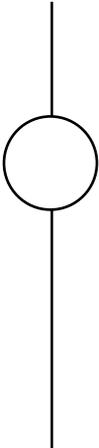
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# Contents

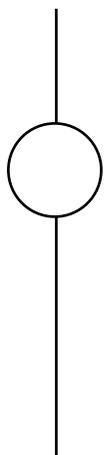
<i>Series editor's foreword</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<b>1 Introduction: biographical research</b>	<b>1</b>
Biographical research: defining the field	1
The development of biographical research	3
Methodological issues	6
The researcher's role	13
Theoretical approaches	14
Biographical research	15
Recommended reading	17
<b>2 Uses of biographical research</b>	<b>18</b>
Uses of biographical research	18
Disciplines and contexts	22
Education	23
Oral history	24
Health and ageing	25
Feminist research	28
Narratives of the body and sexuality	29
Autobiography and biography	30

	Conclusion	31
	Recommended reading	31
<b>3</b>	<b>The life history</b>	<b>33</b>
	The life history	33
	Individual lives and social structures	34
	Life history data and method	37
	Deviance, career, becoming	40
	Case studies	42
	Types of interpretation	46
	Conclusion	50
	Recommended reading	51
<b>4</b>	<b>Autobiography and biography</b>	<b>52</b>
	Autobiography and biography – definitions	52
	Genre	56
	Issues in autobiography and biography	60
	Letters, diaries, memoirs and other personal ‘artefacts’	62
	Case study	66
	Fiction and non-fiction	69
	Conclusion	71
	Recommended reading	72
<b>5</b>	<b>Auto/biography and sociology</b>	<b>73</b>
	Auto/biography – definitions and relations	73
	Individual experiences and auto/biographical writing	75
	Feminism and auto/biography	77
	Intertextuality – written and oral texts	78
	Hermeneutics, phenomenology and narrative texts	80
	Time perspectives – Mead, Schutz and Ricoeur	82
	The researcher as an auto/biographer	84
	The researcher and the researched subject	87
	Individual lives and social lives	88
	Case study	88
	Conclusion	91
	Recommended reading	92
<b>6</b>	<b>Oral history</b>	<b>93</b>
	Oral history – definitions	93
	Uses and types of oral history	95
	Origins	97
	Development and purpose	99
	Ethics	104
	Evidence, truth and the researcher	104

Political standpoint	107
Case study	110
Conclusion	113
Recommended reading	113
<b>7 The narrative analysis of lives</b>	<b>115</b>
Narrative analysis – definitions	115
Narrative analysis	117
Time and narrative	123
Myth and narrative	124
Case study	128
Other ‘models’ of life study	130
Conclusion	132
Recommended reading	133
<b>8 Memory and autobiography</b>	<b>134</b>
Types of memory	134
The social transmission of memories	140
Case study	142
Family and group memories	144
Public and private memories	145
Methodological issues: recollection and selectivity	147
Conclusion	148
Recommended reading	149
<b>9 Ethnography and biographical research</b>	<b>151</b>
Fieldwork, ethnography and participant observation – definition and practice	152
Research roles	152
Methodological issues	153
Ethnography and key informants	154
Reflexivity and the researcher’s life experience of ethnography	157
Ethnographic texts	160
Case study	162
Oral traditions and biography	164
Conclusion	165
Recommended reading	166
<b>10 Conclusion</b>	<b>167</b>
Disciplines	169
The biographical turn	169
Identity	170
Time	171
Memory	172

**viii** Biographical research

<b>Researcher's self</b>	172
<b>Methodology</b>	173
<b>New technology</b>	173
<b>Conclusion</b>	174
<b>Recommended reading</b>	175
<i>Glossary</i>	176
<i>References</i>	178
<i>Index</i>	200



## Series editor's foreword

This Understanding Social Research series is designed to help students to understand how social research is carried out and to appreciate a variety of issues in social research methodology. It is designed to address the needs of students taking degree programmes in areas such as sociology, social policy, psychology, communication studies, cultural studies, human geography, political science, criminology and organization studies and who are required to take modules in social research methods. It is also designed to meet the needs of students who need to carry out a research project as part of their degree requirements. Postgraduate research students and novice researchers will find the books equally helpful.

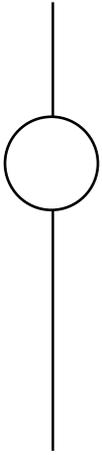
The series is concerned to help readers to 'understand' social research methods and issues. This will mean developing an appreciation of the pleasures and frustrations of social research, an understanding of how to implement certain techniques, and an awareness of key areas of debate. The relative emphasis on these different features will vary from book to book, but in each one the aim will be to see the method or issue from the position of a practising researcher and not simply to present a manual of 'how to' steps. In the process, the series will contain coverage of the major methods of social research and addresses a variety of issues and debates. Each book in the series is written by a practising researcher who has experience of the technique or debates that he or she is addressing. Authors are encouraged to draw on their own experiences and inside knowledge.

This new book on biographical method is very timely and very much in line with the goals of the Understanding Social Research series. Brian Roberts has been engaged in biographical research for many years and is therefore able to draw upon a great deal of experience and expertise in writing this book. However, at the time that he began his work in this area, the method was still in a relatively underdeveloped state. This is not to say that the biographical method is new – it manifestly is not, as anyone with just a passing acquaintance with the history of social research will know. The life history method has been with us for decades. But in the last ten to fifteen years, the biographical method (as it is increasingly referred to) has become an extremely significant approach to social research. This surge of interest in the method can be attributed to a variety of factors: a developing disillusionment with static approaches to data collection; a growing interest in the life course; an increased concern with ‘lived experience’ and how best to express and reveal it; and, of course, the method has shared in the growth in popularity of qualitative research in general.

It is in this sense that Brian Roberts’s book is very timely. He brings a great awareness of the different ways in which the biographical method can be executed, but he does so at a time when there is burgeoning interest in what the method entails. His approach indicates a critical awareness of the different ways of doing biographical research. Such an awareness comes about from being steeped in the method in its many forms. He uses many examples to illustrate his key points, including his own research. It is precisely this kind of style that I have been keen to develop in the series – clear expositions of particular methods coupled with the injection of writers’ own research experiences into those expositions.

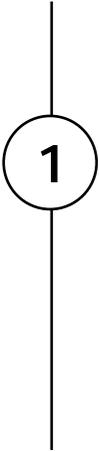
Perhaps one of the biggest difficulties that many of us face when thinking or writing about biographical research is what makes it distinctive. The biographical method draws on materials and ways of conducting research that can be found in many other ways of doing qualitative research, such as the examination of personal documents, conducting interviews, and carrying out a narrative analysis. Readers will find that Brian Roberts makes clear what kind of sensibility a biographical perspective entails and, thereby, what its distinguishing characteristics are. As such, readers will find the exposition in this book clarifies these and many other areas of uncertainty about what makes the biographical method distinctive.

*Alan Bryman*



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# 1

## Introduction: biographical research

### **Biographical research: defining the field**

This book introduces a broad and developing area of study – the collection and interpretation of ‘personal’ or ‘human documents’ (Allport 1942; Blumer 1969). It covers a range of disciplines, how they increasingly influence each other and key issues of analysis and method in the study of ‘lives’. The book title *Biographical Research* is not intended to be associated with a precise definition but to indicate various, often interrelated, approaches to the study of individuals. Biographical research is an exciting, stimulating and fast-moving field which seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future. Denzin provides an indication of the scope of the field:

A family of terms combines to shape the biographical method . . . method, life, self, experience, epiphany, case, autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography, biography, ethnography story, discourse, narrative, narrator, fiction, history, personal history, oral history, case history, case study, writing presence, difference, life history, life story, self story, and personal experience story.

(Denzin 1989: 27)

The kinds of material that are deemed relevant also cover a wide area: 'personal documents' or 'documents of life' (Plummer 1983) may include diaries, letters, autobiographies, biographies, memoranda and other materials (Denzin 1989). Clandinin and Connelly conclude that these are 'field texts', which may be produced before the research for a different usage (Clandinin and Connelly 1994: 419). They outline oral history, annals and chronicles, family stories, photographs and other personal and family artefacts, research interviews, journals, autobiographical writing, letters, conversations and field notes (Clandinin and Connelly 1994). So, documents may be written for different purposes, for different audiences (including the self) and immediately or much later after the events described. All these different sources and strategies have been adjudged, by opponents and proponents, to raise important methodological issues surrounding reliability and validity (see Allport 1942; Denzin 1970: 219–59; Plummer 1983: 13–38; Golby 1994; Ritchie 1995: 7).

The chapter organization of the book is partly based on disciplinary or sub-disciplinary approaches (e.g. sociology, oral history) to show how biographical research and method developed and the debates within approaches. However, it is increasingly difficult to keep to a simple disciplinary format since there is a growing recognition that methodological and theoretical issues have cross-disciplinary ramifications and common lines of influence (e.g. from feminist research). Writers and researchers are more and more aware of developments in other disciplines and are keen to apply knowledge from numerous sources. Indeed, biographical researchers often actively seek to move over disciplinary boundaries. Thus, the book includes references to work across disciplines, for example, particularly in chapters on memory, narrative and ethnography where interdisciplinary work has explored similar issues. Therefore, the book is intentionally interdisciplinary rather than based on one discipline, to show the wider connections between forms of biographical research. The time is right for the publication of a book with this intent because significant developments are taking place within the rapid expansion of interest in the study of lives.

The book is not a step-by-step guide to doing biographical research but attempts to show the key methodological issues and variety of biographical work. Readers will have an appreciation of this developing field and particular issues, including interpretation, memory, genres of writing, the audience, and the researcher's role.

Biographical research is part of the broader practice of qualitative methods: 'Qualitative researchers tend to espouse an approach in which theory and empirical investigation are interwoven . . . during or at the end of fieldwork, rather than being a precursor to it' (Bryman 1988: 81). Qualitative research has a number of features stemming from its philosophical and theoretical approach to the social world, including remaining close to the experiences and views of the researched. These can be summarized, following

Bryman, as 'viewing events, action, norms, values etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied'; 'to provide detailed descriptions of the social settings'; 'commitment to understanding events, behaviour, etc. in their context'; 'to view social life in processual, rather than static terms'; 'a research strategy which is relatively open and unstructured'; and a rejection of 'the formulation of theories and concepts in advance' of fieldwork which may 'impose a potentially alien framework' on subjects (Bryman 1988: 61–8). While biographical research shares a common outlook with qualitative research more generally, it also has its own specific challenges. An initial problem in the field of biographical research is the differing use of terms – oral history, personal narrative, biography and autobiography – and their interchangeable use (Reinharz 1992: 129). However, a common distinction is made between life story and life history. A life story

is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another . . . A life story is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects.

(Atkinson 1998: 8)

The life history is usually taken to refer to the collection, interpretation and report writing of the 'life' (the life history method) in terms of the story told or as the construction of the past experience of the individual (from various sources) to relate to the story (see Denzin 1970: 219–59; Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997: 9). Therefore, the term life story is commonly applied to the narrated story by the author while life history infers the later interpretive, presentational work of the researcher. However, such a distinction is difficult to maintain in practice where, for example, the researcher conducts an interview with a participant. In general, in this book, the term 'biographical research' will be used to denote work which uses the stories of individuals and other 'personal materials' to understand the individual life within its social context.

### **The development of biographical research – the narrativist/biographical turn?**

It would appear that the 'cultural and linguistic turn' (including the rise of cultural studies, the 'reading' of cultural phenomena, and so on) in the social sciences is being followed now by a narrative, biographical or auto/biographical turn (Riessman 1993: 5–6; Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000). For a number of writers this heralds a very significant shift in social study. Stanley claims the study of lives is 'raising central epistemological and thus political

issues for all forms of social inquiry and praxis' (Stanley 1994b: 89). Thus, questions are being raised regarding explanation, understanding and interpreting, the determination of individual and group action and assumptions regarding social being.

The self-representation of the individual life or 'autobiography' is not a new phenomenon but has long development as a 'cultural practice' (Maschuch 1997). Even before the eighteenth-century Enlightenment conceptions of political rights, religious discourses from the Protestant Reformation carried notions of introspection. According to Mellor and Shilling, the legacy of a 'cognitive' priority over the carnal can be found in the reflexive aspect of current autobiography (Shilling and Mellor 1994: 125). For Porter, within the Enlightenment 'the traditional Puritan genre of spiritual self-examination was supplemented by more secular modes of confession' (Porter 2000: 278). However, despite philosophical, literary and other explorations of individuality, modern social sciences have tended to omit the 'humanity' of the individual in the pursuit of causal accounts, objective study of the general patterns of human behaviour and standard features of individuals drawn from natural science assumptions, procedures and principles (Rustin 1999: 65). The 'individuality' of individuals and the diversity of human meanings have been either neglected or relegated to a secondary concern (a residue). This is not to say that a 'humanist' or 'idealist' strand of thought has not existed within the social sciences. A complex body of thought from Dilthey's biographical study and Weber's *verstehen*, the phenomenology of Husserl and Schutz, Chicagoan interactionism (Park, Mead and their followers) and Sartre's existential procedure has had a 'subterranean existence' in the social sciences (see Erben 1998b).

In the 1970s there was a change in the way 'science' was being seen – the nature of scientific knowledge and how it was achieved was being put under scrutiny. Within the social sciences, for example, interactionist or subjectivist approaches were being advanced, especially within the sociology of deviance, which were giving a renewed attention to individual meanings and choice. Within sociology a challenge to the dominance of functionalism was being made by Marxian theory, conflict approaches, and subjectivist or humanistic accounts of social life. Meanwhile, cultural studies was beginning to form out of a mixture of literary criticism, popular cultural analyses, social history, new sociologies and additions from Gramscian Marxism, Barthes' semiotics, the structuralism of Althusser and other sources (Rustin 1999). The outcome has been described as a cultural or linguistic 'turn' due to the emphasis on the concerns with language and representation, and the detailed analysis of 'texts'. However, the reading and investigation of cultural forms as texts and the use of 'discourse' to describe bodies of thought and practice produced a diminution or disappearance of the creative, active role of individuals. Even so, the increasing influence of postmodernism with its critique of grand narratives – dominant ideologies and social theories – and a stress on change,

diversity, and uncertainty, within cultural studies and the social sciences more generally, have (despite deconstructionism and discourse theory) opened possibilities for new accounts of the individual (see Rustin 1999). The growth of 'narrative analysis' or the advent of a 'narrative turn' has added in further dimensions, for example, of story and time. If we are living in a postmodern or post-traditional world where there is not a shared reality, and identity no longer rests on rituals or given definitions, with resulting risks, uncertainties and doubts (cf. Beck, Giddens), there is also now scope for new types of individuality while the same shifts make the construction of new identities a fraught enterprise (see Shilling and Mellor 1994).

The appeal of biographical research is that it is exploring, in diverse methodological and interpretive ways, how individual accounts of life experience can be understood within the contemporary cultural and structural settings and is thereby helping to chart the major societal changes that are underway, but not merely at some broad social level. Biographical research has the important merit of aiding the task of understanding major social shifts, by including how new experiences are interpreted by individuals within families, small groups and institutions. Perhaps an informative way of understanding the 'biographical turn' in the human sciences is to outline the series of changes in qualitative research during the last century. Denzin and Lincoln (1994c, 2000b) have identified 'five moments' of qualitative research, from the early 1900s and the work of the single fieldworker onwards through various phases after World War II. A crisis of both representation and legitimation has arisen marked by the problem of the connection between experience and the social text compiled by the researcher (usually associated with interpretive, linguistic and rhetorical turns in social theory), and questions of validity, generalizability and reliability 'retheorized in postpositivist, constructionist-naturalistic and interpretive discourses'. Theories are to be understood according to narrative, the concept of the superior researcher is replaced, and action or activist research and local theorization on specific contexts and problems are developed (Denzin and Lincoln 1994c: 7–11). In a possible sixth moment underway, research practice will be multi-voiced and multi-representational (Denzin and Lincoln 1994a) (see Conclusion, this volume).

For some commentators a note of caution is needed when assessing the emergence of the 'narrative turn'. It may not be as progressive or humanistic as it appears. Goodson (1995) places the upsurge in interest in personal knowledge in the genre of narrative or story within the context of cultural restructuring in contemporary society, for example the trend for storytelling, 'human interest' features and personal anecdote in television news. It must be placed alongside the 'attack on many of the existing agencies of cultural mediation and production' (schools, universities, welfare agencies and so on) and the 'overall sponsorship of personal and practical forms of discourse' in cultural production. Noting the power and shifts in the output of

a global media, he says 'the life story represents a form of cultural apparatus that accompanies an aggrandising state and market system' (Goodson 1995: 90).

### Methodological issues

A reason offered for the traditional lack of use of life stories within sociology and other fields was offered by Becker – that the dominant, 'scientific' hypothetico-deductive method produced the notion that hypotheses were to be constructed for testing and that life stories did not provide the 'findings' that sociological researchers were required to obtain (Becker 1970). Biographical research was alleged to be wanting when measured against criteria of reliability and validity: life stories perhaps provided insights, sources for possible hypotheses before the formulation of 'real' objective research, or more emphasis had been placed on validity rather than reliability. (It may be worth noting here that writers have observed that qualitative methods differ on the balance between reliability and validity; see Kirk and Miller 1986; Perakyla 1997.)

As we have said, the study of lives has become much more accepted and commonplace. However, questions still arise concerning the 'adequacy' or 'quality' of accounts or, putting it rather differently, how far life story research should follow the methodological standards of quantitative research or apply its own qualitative principles. The study of life stories has often taken traditional criteria at least as a starting reference point. However, many writers do argue that the attempt to recognize the meanings given to the social world by individuals requires rather different criteria. For example, Hatch and Wisniewski argue that 'truth' and related epistemological issues can be seen in ways that go beyond the standardized notions of reliability, validity, and generalizability. They also give a range of alternatives used by writers, including adequacy, aesthetic finality, accessibility, authenticity, credibility, explanatory power, persuasiveness, coherence, plausibility, trustworthiness, epistemological validity and verisimilitude and so on (Hatch and Wisniewski 1995a: 128–9; see also Riessman 1993; Denzin and Lincoln 1994a; Blumenfeld-Jones 1995). Here, Silverman provides a warning that there has been a 'romantic' influence on contemporary sociology, which gives the 'experiential as authentic'; he stresses that the interview is collaborative in the construction of the self. More broadly the interview and the appeal of the authentic have a wider presence in society and should be part of explanation 'rather than to be relied upon' (Silverman 1997: 248).

The study of biographical research rests on a view of individuals as creators of meanings which form the basis of their everyday lives. Individuals act according to meanings through which they make sense of social existence. Interpretive, subjective or qualitative approaches to the study of lives

have been inspired by Weber's *verstehen*, Schutz's phenomenological perspective, Chicagoan interactionism, Sartre's progressive–regressive method, narratology, literary criticism, and ethnographic analyses in fieldwork, in an attempt to outline the subjective meanings of the 'life' account. Despite their diversity these approaches have some common problems of analysis, such as the 'reality' of events and the meanings attributed to them by life stories, the particular tools or conventions of language used to represent life experience, and issues in the means of interpretation (Denzin 1989: 13–14). While the attention to subjective meanings places biographical research firmly within the orbit of qualitative methods, until recently it has attracted relatively little textbook discussion, being subsumed within ethnographical fieldwork or as allied with and subsumed under in-depth or informal interviewing.

A key debate within much biographical research is 'realism' versus 'constructionism' in the study of lives – it is a debate which has generated forthright views among international sociologists in the field of 'biography and society'. At its most simple realism holds that there is some objective knowledge of reality – an empirical, material basis for individual experience and that stories reflect a lived reality. For realism, the tendency towards a 'constructionist' or 'narrative' position, the reliance on the 'text', the analysis of 'intertextuality' and multiple 'voices' is ultimately a retreat from any idea of reality – interpretation feeds upon interpretation in a swirl of language and symbols. Such a view, it is held, lacks historical insight, political context and a sociological perspective on institutions and structure. For constructionists, at the extreme, the view that life stories reflect reality or empirical truth is simplistic and misconceived – a 'biographical illusion': stories are not simply referential of experience (see Denzin 1989: 14, 20–6). In fact, both the respondents' 'story' and its interpretation by the researcher are shaped by narrative conventions. The emphasis in analysis is also upon how the story is formed, including the 'performance' and collaboration with the researcher. In a more postmodernist vein, there is recognition that interpretation should be attentive to inconsistency and ambiguities in stories rather than assume one story and a simple receptiveness of the audience. Differing textual interpretations are seen as possible, if not desirable (see M. Evans 1993). Focus turns to the processes of 'writing up' of research from the taped stories and field notes – rather than representing an 'objective reality', narrative structures and rhetorical devices become resources for constructing a text (Richardson 1995: 199). These structures provide meanings and thereby define the people and circumstances within the research process. Even scientific writing rests on narrative structures and conventions (Richardson 1995: 199).

Usually, biographical researchers take a pragmatic stance in research practice instead of a firm allegiance to 'realism' or 'constructionism'. There has to be a basis in the material world including the embedded institutions,

core structures, and evident bodily realities in which individual existence is situated. Life stories commonly refer to 'real' events and experiences – and often the tellers may be the only witnesses to such happenings but, commonly, their accounts can be checked against other written, visual or oral accounts. Nevertheless, how these events are perceived and selected (even chronologically reordered or changed over time) and placed within understandings of the individual life – by metaphor, myth and so on – are necessary aspects of analysis. A constructionist view can be used to help to analyse how the tellers shape the telling of their experiences of particular events – how the 'reality' (for them) is formed through the account. At base, the common pragmatic view would be that stories or accounts by individuals are central but that they are collected and used in different ways for different methodological and theoretical purposes thus resisting being trapped by realist or constructionist imperatives. For Atkinson and Coffey, the importance of reflexivity and the dependence on conventions of writing and reading in textual practices must be recognized, but they argue strongly that rejections of simple positivist and realist assumptions should not necessarily lead to the 'nihilism' of a textual approach. Writing conventions need to be applied and explored while conveying the diverse lives of others (Atkinson and Coffey 1995: 55). Again, generally, in biographical research a pragmatic orientation is often taken, relying on the similarities in approaches and procedures – the emphasis is on purpose, to gain insights into individual lives as, perhaps, reflecting wider cultural meanings of the society rather than dwelling on differences in methodological and theoretical assumptions (Miller 2000: 18).

A number of important changes have taken place in the discussion of research methods during the past fifteen years or so. Qualitative methodology has risen in relative prominence alongside its quantitative counterpart. In addition, the emphasis on 'methods' has broadened to methodology as the discussion of stages in research have brought a new notion of the research process as involving complex relations between the empirical world, data collection, research design and theorization as the researcher moves between parts of research procedure (Bryman and Burgess 1994b: 1–2). In recent qualitative texts more attention has been devoted to analysing data. Bryman and Burgess (1994b: 3–6) note there have been two main 'general strategies' discussed in these texts: analytic induction and grounded theory.

Florian Znaniecki offered the analytic induction approach to theorization as a contrast to statistical methods (see Hammersley 1990: 163–4). Analytic induction has a number of stages. The researcher outlines a preliminary definition of an area, problem or issue and constructs a provisional explanation. Cases are studied to see if they fit the initial hypothesis. If the data and hypothesis do not match, the hypothesis may require redefinition or the case or cases are rejected. The initial area, problem or issue may need

reformulation. As cases are examined the process of hypothesis redefinition continues and more consistency with the data is attained. The process continues with the interrelation between data and hypothesis being scrutinized until a relationship is established as cases that do not fit are no longer found. In summary, in place of statistical sampling a theoretical procedure is applied. Analytic induction is based on a close investigation and comparison of cases – new cases are examined for similarities and differences with existing cases. Analytic induction has the advantages of an intimate interrelation between research observation, conceptualization and theory. On the other hand there are a number of difficulties. Criticisms have pointed to its weakness when compared with causal or enumerative procedures and the great amount of time and effort required (see Denzin 1970: 199; Vidich and Lyman 1994: 39). Analytic induction would seem, at first sight, to be very appropriate for the analysis of life stories since it does not depend on ‘pre-existing formulations or large samples’: ‘Rather, it proceeds from scrutiny of one case to produce a low-level generalisation which then starts to define and characterise a given phenomenon’ (Plummer 1983: 125). Unfortunately, the instances of the detailed use of analytical induction appear sparse within qualitative research, possibly due to its demanding procedures.

A second major procedure for relating research and theory generation is grounded theory as offered by Glaser and Strauss (1967). For Charmaz, the procedure can be used across disciplines and is compatible with both interpretive and ‘traditional, positivistic assumptions of an external reality that researchers can discover and record’ (Charmaz 1995: 30). The intent is to provide a systematic approach to qualitative research which clearly outlines the connection between data and theory and how conceptual development can be achieved and checked. Theory is generated during the research through an ongoing interrelation between a systematic data collection and analysis (Strauss and Corbin 1994: 273). The process is to be open with ideas and conceptualization arising from the data rather than dependent upon pre-existing theoretical approaches. Any other insights from other sources have to be related to the data to avoid ‘mismatch’. Grounded theory also challenged a series of assumptions about qualitative research, for instance, as ‘impressionistic and unsystematic’ and as prior to more ‘scientific’ methods while showing that data collection and analysis were inter-related (Charmaz 1995: 29).

In the generation of new theory through comparative analysis, verification should take place accurately and as much as possible but it should not overtake generation – theory must be grounded in data (Glaser and Strauss 1970: 34). As Hammersley says, ‘empirical fit’ is achieved by concepts within grounded theory as ‘sensitizing’ in providing meaning and ‘plausibility’ – more than a prior theory; for ‘most purposes it is not necessary to go beyond the level of plausibility provided by comparative method and grounded theorizing’ (Hammersley 1990: 173–4). Importantly, by theoretical sampling

cases are scrutinized until new features no longer arise, or 'theoretical saturation'. As with analytical induction, often grounded theory is referred to in biographical research more as a general stance rather than in detail. Grounded theory provides for a connection between data and theory to be maintained as a procedure for researchers to follow in addressing the complexities of social life but it has also been criticized for the practical problems of the degree of time spent and the detail of analysis. Moreover, a common criticism is that it is often cited in research as a means of giving a respectability to the approach applied. It is also frequently cited as an influence on developments in computer software programs for qualitative research (see Mangabeira 1996).

Grounded theory does attempt to tackle the problem in qualitative research of a tendency towards description due to an avoidance of theory, or reluctance to address it, fearing that the naturalistic commitment to the subject will be compromised. Theory used too early, it is felt, may flatten out social ambiguities and inconsistencies and obscure the views of respondents. Analytical induction, Bryman suggests, may be more prone to this problem than grounded theory with its more delayed use of theoretical generalization; again a tension can be found between greater theoretical concerns and the respondent's view of life (Bryman 1988: 87). In reviewing the subsequent development of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln argue that while some 'postpositivist' bases of the grounded theory approach can be challenged the general procedure of accumulating interpretations from detailed observations of social life will remain (Denzin and Lincoln 1994a: 577).

As stated earlier, grounded theory is often mentioned in particular qualitative work, including biographical studies, as informing the procedure used, and commonly a broadly phenomenological or interactionist approach is also cited (Jones 1983). However, frequently how the procedure has been applied is far from easily apparent. While in the study of one life 'theoretical sampling' and 'constant comparison' are not immediately appropriate, multiple life stories could be used in this way (Plummer 1983: 126–7). For Charmaz, there is an 'inherent empiricism' in grounded theory methods 'whether their data sources are autobiographic, published accounts, movies, intensive interviews, case studies, participant observer field notes or personal journals'. There has been a 'realist' orientation (despite initial interpretive assumptions) because of the authority given to the researcher to provide an objective account of the detailed lives and surrounding world of the respondents (Charmaz 1995: 31). Similarly, Miller points to the use of 'saturation' as an important part of a realist/grounded theory approach within some biographical work (e.g. Bertaux) (Miller 2000: 11). Charmaz believes that while grounded theory may be criticized for an 'emphasis on fracturing the data' by analytical categories it does not rule out a concentration on the individual. However, Charmaz later, in responding to criticisms, for instance from narrativists that it breaks up the

data and neglects how meanings are constructed by narrator and researcher, points to both objectivist and constructivist ‘visions’ for the future of grounded theory (Charmaz 2000: 521, 528).

Finally, analytic induction or grounded theory or other observational/interpretive procedures can be seen as forms of reasoning. For instance, Polkinghorne argues that in seeing the relations between data and theory as forms of reasoning, two types can be found: the ‘paradigmatic type’ is based on ‘paradigmatic reasoning’ – and applies an analytic process that finds categories in the data, whereas a ‘narrative type’ based on ‘narrative reason’ is an analytic process that gives storied accounts (Polkinghorne 1995: 21; see Polkinghorne 1988).

A topic much discussed in qualitative research is the process of ‘coding’ of data either by hand or via qualitative research computer programs (see Bernard 1995: Ch. 9; Coffey and Atkinson 1996: Chs 2, 6; Miller 2000: 150–3). The notion of ‘coding’ has been applied in qualitative work in a variety of ways. Generally, it refers to how the data are ‘sorted’, categorized by ‘codes’ which summarize or order the material. This is a continuous process as the data are accumulated and scrutinized, and can guide the gathering of future material as well as the initial steps in formulating concepts and theory. The close examination of gathered material provides new insights and ideas, new ways of organizing parts of the materials, forming types and raising new research questions. Coding is a means of relaying these fresh insights to the data. It may take various forms according to the depth and time spent on the contact with the material and research setting – from tentative coding at the beginning to more definite levels and linkages of categories as material is collected and analysed. For example, Bernard distinguishes between coding and indexing when describing ‘codes’ as encryption, indexing and measurement devices (Bernard 1995: 193). Also, stages in analysis can be identified according to initial work in the collection of materials and, later, fuller attention to coding and building connections. Crabtree and Miller contrast codes in an editing style of data analysis where observations on data are organized into categories or codes with a template style which is a prior coding according to some initial view of the data, previous research, or existing theorization (Crabtree and Miller 1999). Further, various writers have indicated different types of coding according to family relationships, social contexts and other social criteria, or codes which denote explanations, descriptions, and so on.

Another issue prominent in biographical research is the question of size of study – how many stories to collect? Some researchers would rule out a single life story as the basis for a study. An impression at least has been given that early sociological interest in the life history has devoted attention to the single case. This has been due to the famous examples such as the life of Stanley in *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw [1930]1966) and Władek in *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas and Znaniecki [1918–20]1958; see Chapter 3). But while

these individuals are presented at length, for instance Władek's 'life-record' is over three hundred pages, it is preceded by around eighty pages of introduction, has seventeen pages of conclusion and numerous explanatory footnotes, there is the claim that the story is shared: Władek is seen as representative of a wider mass and Stanley as typical of hundreds of others. Many sociologists would say that it is not possible to gain an adequate portrait of a culture or to evaluate what is specific to the individual and what belongs to the wider group, institution or society since there is not an appropriate theoretical sample and basis for comparability and representativeness. On the other hand, an individual may be the only direct witness to certain events (although indirect evidence may be available) and may be regarded as representative (an exemplar) of a group, e.g. as in the case of Władek and Stanley, their stories are placed alongside other source materials. In *The Polish Peasant*, groups of family letters (including short excerpts of letters to Władek from his family) are included alongside newspaper reports, official records and other materials. It may also be argued that the research focus is upon particular meanings rather than group regularities. An objection could be offered that a simple individual–society split (the individual as essentially separate) is being offered by ruling out single life stories. Again, usually in biographical research, a pragmatic approach to methodological concerns is evident. As Erben warns, too much emphasis on research techniques can limit an understanding of the connection between the method and purpose of the study (Erben 1998b: 4). The vital issue could be the quality of the theoretical reasoning rather than questions of representativeness and so on. There is also the question of purpose. In *The Polish Peasant* each type of material (e.g. letters, official records, and the life-record) was used to gain information on differing aspects of individual, family and communal change. The intimate detail of the single life history (or a small number), with some commentary–interpretation, allows us to gain a feeling of 'knowing' a life and situation outside common experience and establishes the 'warrant for credibility and authority in the text' (Atkinson 1990: 133). Whereas commonly today multiple lives are given within an analysis of the wider socio-historical context, what is striking about *The Polish Peasant* is the range of materials used to address substantive areas and the breadth of theoretical approach. What was not clear in the classic study – and remains an issue today which may be obscured by taking a 'pragmatic approach' – are the types of conceptualization and uses of personal documents being obtained within the research process: at its simplest, is the purpose to generate or validate theory, gain new conceptual insights or merely illustrate existing theories, or some combination, during collection, interpretation and the presentation of the research?

A final question concerns readership or audience: how the 'text' is read, received, or deconstructed has gained significant attention in recent ethnographic and biographical study. However, the questions of interpretation,

'authenticity' or 'plausibility' of life stories and the construction of life histories is not a new one, as shown by Blumer's evaluation of Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant* (Blumer 1969: 126). Blumer questioned the representativeness, reliability, adequacy of purpose and validity of interpretation of the various documents used – the exact connection between the material presented and the development of conceptualization remained unclear. Nevertheless, Blumer argued that a number of important contributions had been made including the advocacy of subjective aspects of social life and the necessity of human documents, and the life record in particular.

### The researcher's role

Traditionally in qualitative research commentators in methodological texts have stressed the empathetic orientation to the 'subject' on behalf of the researcher, who nevertheless has an 'objective' role as the questioner, interpreter and presenter of the finished research text. More recently the emphasis has shifted to a recognition of the collaborative and reflexive role of the researcher. Writers have called for researchers to indicate their own relationship to the study – their presence in the research and the influence of social background, for example gender, race, social class, or religion. However, there is a difficulty in assessing how much of the personal life of the researcher should be considered and entered in the text. Sparkes points out that a 'self-absorption' or 'narcissism' may intrude (Sparkes 1994a: 166). Atkinson argues that no matter to what psychological, social science or other uses the material is put (such as for information on community or family or disciplinary concerns), the interpretations of life stories are either from a theoretical or personal or subjective basis (Atkinson 1998: 66). Even so, it seems there is more often some kind of overlap or homology between the theoretical and the 'subjective' influences (Atkinson 1998: 66). At base, however, despite these questions and trends in biographical research, the intention in the study of lives is to gain an understanding of individuals' life experiences within their socio-historical context.

To place the researcher fully within the research is to recognize that we all have stories and it seems a fundamental part of social interaction to 'tell our tales'. In the collection of stories (via interviews), interaction is not only helping individuals to reflect and give form and structure to their lives (in the interview situation) but also helping researchers to begin to draw on their own experiences. How 'collaborative' this relation is in the interview, the interpretation and the presentation, has been open to much discussion – whether the power relation is fundamentally unequal and cannot be overcome or whether it can be modified during the full research process. But the application of terms such as 'power', 'authority', 'empowerment', 'voice'

and 'reciprocity' in regard to relations between researcher and interviewer should be used with caution to describe what is a complex and problematic process (see Sparkes 1997b). For some, biographical and other qualitative research is a means of social intervention that recognizes not only that the research role does affect the context but that it should be involved in aiding personal or collective realization – as consciousness raising, as generating solidarities, or giving those who have not been heard a voice. Even so, a difficult issue remains – a commitment to giving a 'voice' may be insufficient since little is added to their perceptions of the world, which may in turn reflect dominant discourses (Sparkes 1994b: 108).

In summary, discussion of the researcher's role (as a biographical participant) raises not simply the degree to which the researcher should place her/his 'voice' within a socio-political context but methodological and ethical questions concerning the researcher's role. For the researcher, questions arise across the research from collection to presentation regarding subjective interpretations and judgements as new issues or new insights arise. More profoundly, the degree and type of personal 'investment' is in question, e.g. how much to reveal of the self in 'sharing stories', in building trust, establishing 'credibility' or establishing 'solidarity' in the 'field' and in the written study (see Sparkes 1994a: 167; Atkinson 1998: 64).

### Theoretical approaches

Qualitative research studies, including biographical research, have drawn on various theoretical approaches – ethnomethodology, phenomenology, narrative analysis, symbolic interactionism, discourse theory, conversational analysis and others (see Silverman 1993; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994: 257–8; Bryman and Burgess 1994a, 1999; Denzin and Lincoln 1994c; Feldman 1995). Bryman and Burgess (1994b) report that some analyses have been based around how language is used drawing, for example, on ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism or discourse. Other studies, including 'classic' ethnography and life story work, follow a 'descriptive' or interpretive approach. A third strand is marked by a priority given to theory generation, such as grounded theory. Of course, these distinctions are not hard and fast (Bryman and Burgess 1994b: 6). In terms of biographical research, studies tend to cross these boundaries, even if the detail of how they are using grounded theory or symbolic interactionism can be rather thin. Useful comparisons of different 'interpretive paradigms' – positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, cultural studies – in qualitative research generally, are given by Denzin and Lincoln (1994c). In biographical work in particular, Miller (2000) outlines three approaches to the study of life stories and family histories. First, the realist approach uses induction, among other procedures, employs 'saturation' (cf. grounded theory) and

unfocused interviews, and considers reliability as important. Second, the neo-positivist approach is deductive, theory testing, uses focused interviews and places importance on validity. Finally, the narrative approach sees 'fact' as secondary to an exploration of the ongoing construction of an individual's unique standpoint, uses life or family stories, and emphasizes the interplay between interviewer and interviewee in structuring reality (Miller 2000: 10–14). We can add that the approaches to life stories may vary across, as well as within, the social science disciplines. Different theoretical and methodological approaches may be brought together in types of study or a single study. But commonalities do exist: for example, where interviews are used there is an interactive relationship and, more generally, there is a cross-disciplinary commitment to show the respondents' meanings (Yow 1994: 10). Miller sees both overlaps and tensions between approaches. In terms of theorization, realism and neo-positivism may stress induction or deduction but in practice the research process is more a 'circular' movement between the two, while sharing notions of 'objective truth' and 'factual reality'. In contrast, narrative approaches question the idea of a singular objective reality, and focus on the constructive, relational, 'reality-producing' nature of the interview situation. Nevertheless, all three see some kind of 'tension' between the individuals' subjective view and their perception of social structure (see Miller 2000: 14–17).

## Biographical research

The term 'biographical research' is used in this book to encompass a range of types of research (e.g. in oral history, sociology) and biographical data (text, oral, visual, multimedia). The book addresses a number of methodological and other issues, including the epistemological concerns in research, in the use of life stories – from the interview or self-written accounts of lives. While a variety of terms are used to describe work in this general field, for instance in view of its methodology, e.g. the in-depth or life-story interview with those studied (the story-teller, respondent, or the researched), and what is collected and how it is interpreted via the life-story, life history, life cycle and so on, what is very interesting is the growing sense of common purpose. The intent of biographical research in its various guises is to collect and interpret the lives of others as part of human understanding.

**Chapter 2: Uses of biographical research** – This chapter provides a general overview of how biographical research has been used within a selected number of disciplines and empirical areas. The aim is to indicate the broad range of work now being undertaken and its usefulness in terms of information and insights that would be more difficult to obtain within other methods.

**Chapter 3: The life history** – This chapter examines the origins of the 'life

history' approach within Chicagoan sociology during the 1920s and 1930s where it was applied to understand the processes of immigration and the nature of social problems. The use of 'personal documents' within sociology and other disciplines was subject to intensive reassessment in the 1930s and 1940s, while some revival of use took place in the 1960s. More latterly, the 'life history' approach has undergone further re-examination following the influence of postmodernism and other views.

**Chapter 4: Autobiography and biography** – This chapter addresses the literary forms of 'autobiography' and 'biography', for instance with reference to questions of genre and the interplay between modes of writing. Questions of 'referentiality', authorship, the fiction/non-fiction distinction and the breadth of autobiographical expression and biography are considered. Writing on the life of Dickens is discussed in relation to how his fiction contained an autobiographical 'statement' and biographical connections.

**Chapter 5: Auto/biography and sociology** – This chapter examines the study of 'auto/biography' within sociology, as the distinction between auto-biography and biography has been challenged due to the influences of feminist, postmodernist and other writing. Again, questions of genre are raised and the role of the researcher's own biography in the collection and writing of the lives of others.

**Chapter 6: Oral history** – This chapter outlines the development of oral history which seeks to report the past experiences of individuals (and communities and organizations). Oral history has increasingly been affected by methodological and theoretical work in other disciplines on the complexities of understanding life stories, for instance the absences in recollection and the reshaping of the 'past'. Oral history has also challenged 'traditional' history by giving the life experience of those who usually are not heard.

**Chapter 7: The narrative analysis of lives** – This chapter describes the narrative approach to the study of lives, which takes the idea of story to interpret how individuals construct an account of life. Writers have pointed to various forms of narrative and the part they play in the formation of the self or identity. The narrative often contains a moral evaluation or summary of the life. The chapter also contains various other 'models' of lives that have been applied in the social sciences – for example, the life course and life cycle.

**Chapter 8: Memory and autobiography** – The question of 'memory' has become more and more central to discussion of the collection of life stories within biographical research. Oral historians, for example, are looking towards other disciplines, including psychology, for greater understanding of the operation and forms of memory, while within psychology some writers are attempting to include more sophisticated notions of the interrelation between the individual autobiography and social context.

**Chapter 9: Ethnography and biographical research** – Fieldwork has traditionally contained accounts of individual lives, typically in the guise of the

'ethnographic informant'. There have been examples of 'fuller' accounts of individual lives but relatively little attempt to analyse 'life stories' in detail. However, this situation is undergoing change as the interview relation, the researcher's own life and research life, and the researched as 'subjects' are under increasing re-examination.

**Chapter 10: Conclusion** – For a number of writers the human and social sciences are experiencing a 'biographical' or 'auto/biographical' turn as the importance of the collection of lives and the researcher's own biographical relation to research become more apparent – and raise questions concerning how knowledge is produced. The chapter returns to the problems of definition and practice in biographical research – questions of purpose, and methodological and related issues and, finally, issues of practice including the researcher as auto/biographer.

### Recommended reading

- Bryman, A. and Burgess, R. G. (eds) (1999) *Qualitative Research*, 4 vols. London: Sage. (These volumes include key articles on issues, methods, and analysis and interpretation.)
- Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds) ([1994]2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd revised ed. London: Sage. (A very comprehensive textbook which addresses important issues in qualitative research including major perspectives, strategies of inquiry, methods of collection, modes of analysis, interpretation, and the future of qualitative research. It contains chapters on biographical method, narrative, interviewing and documents.)
- Riessman, C. K. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*. London: Sage. (A short introduction to narrative analysis, which indicates its use (with a wide range of references) across numerous disciplines, raises methodological and theoretical issues and provides 'practical models' of analysis using examples.)
- Yow, V. R. (1994) *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. London: Sage. (This is a practical outline and review of types of research studies in oral history. It contains an interview guide, information on research principles and record keeping, as well as reviews of key texts at the end of each chapter.)

Biographical researchers work with a range of different types of data including diaries, notebooks, interactive websites, videos, weblogs and written personal narratives with methods of collection varying from the directly interventionist in, for example oral history interviewing, to a more detached encouragement and stimulation to write and record as in the collection of accounts through. Writing and researching in the context of the sociology department at the University of Essex in and other research outputs. Biographical methods. Book Chapter. How to cite: Bornat, Joanna (2008). Biographical methods. In: Alasuutari, Pertti; Bickman, Leonard and Brannen, Julia eds. The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods. London, UK: Sage, pp. 344–356. For guidance on citations see FAQs. the contribution they make to social research. methods. On that basis the themes I will be. Biographical Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective in the Field of Migration Studies. Ursula Apitzsch and Irini Siouti Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität. Frankfurt am Main. April 2007. 2. Introduction.3 1. The history and establishment of the biographical research approach in the social sciences .3. The biographical research, which focuses on biographical identity or biographical structuring (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000, 114ff.), assumes that the link between structure and individuals could only be understood sufficiently by analysing the development of the individual personality in the life course. Biographical Research. Zinn. Development of types and contrastive comparison of several cases. 1 Introduction: biographical research Biographical research: dening the eld The development of biographical research Methodological issues The researcher’s role Theoretical approaches Biographical research Recommended reading. 2 Uses of biographical research Uses of biographical research Disciplines and contexts Education Oral history Health and ageing Feminist research Narratives of the body and sexuality Autobiography and biography. ix xi. 1 1 3 6 13 14 15 17. 18 18 22 23 24 25 28 29 30.