Rapporteur’s Notes
Biographical Research
(Salam Fall)

Annica Ojermark

2006
This presentation will deal with the biographic method and the renewed interest in this method within sociology and the social sciences in general. It will also address the lessons that can be drawn from the collection and analysis of narratives. The presentation draws on my own experience using this approach for the past fifteen years, and my most recent research in Dakar. For this research we used biographic quantitative surveys on 100,000 biographies, drew a sub-sample and study the relational networks drawn from life experiences.

In the work we have done, we started with a questionnaire focused on the household to talk to people because we are concerned with the representativeness of samples. In Bamako we used two thousand households and from these we selected a sample to study qualitatively. A biographic survey was an excellent tool for the analysis of networks because it allowed us to see how members of a community were linked and in what ways. To get at these networks, we asked questions about who had assisted individuals and households in gaining access to various opportunities, goods, and services. For example with access to jobs or in acquiring a house, we asked who helped them. These surveys thus exposed the relational lives of each individual and identify those that had strong or weak relations. From this point, we could pick a smaller sub sample of about sixty for a deeper qualitative analysis using the life biographical method.

The biographic survey is a privileged analysis tool. Although it has recently experienced a renewed popularity and interest in the social sciences, the method reaches far back. It is essentially, because it deals with people’s stories, an interdisciplinary method and one that has roots in literature (the autobiographic). This is just a reminder on its origins; now I will go on to discuss it more in terms of the discipline of sociology.

The Chicago School of Sociology, which has always focused on urban areas, has produced remarkable work over the years:

- Thomas and Znaniecki published the groundbreaking ‘The Polish Peasant’ (Published between 1918 and 1920), which exposed how migrant workers adjust to their new environments and the strategies they use to adapt.
- Given inspiration to much research, such as Oscar Lewis’ ‘The Children of Sanchez’, published 1964, which charts the biographies of a poor Mexican family. Oscar Lewis’ biographical research gave rise to the culture of poverty discourse.
- Daniel Bertaux was in large part responsible for the resurgence and renewal of the biographical approach in the social sciences. See for example ‘Biography and Society: the life history approach in the social sciences’, published 1981.

The Shift in Sociology

- Influenced by Marxism and structuralism.
- Emphasizes the players as ‘actors’. Important to reveal the hidden experience of ordinary people, and based on empirical work move towards generalization. The lives of individuals are a reflection of the social life (as well as the reverse).
- Very big shift from the normal focus: which had been to approach every research situation with a lot of information and pre-formed ideas about what one is looking for/will find
• Rather, this approach looks to construct theory from what is revealed through the reconstruction of an individual's life.

• In order to reveal, and to see/understand this evolution (of groups e.g. migrants) we need to understand the trajectories of individuals over time.

• The concept of biography aims at valorizing human experience to better understand social dynamics. The individual is a reflection of social dynamics.

• We collect the life experiences in order to understand the social dynamics, and to get at the space in-between the individual and the society (the interaction of the two); we want to understand how through their lifestyle can someone reveal things about their society.

• When you talk of 'life story' or 'life history' it's the actor who tells a story; a reconstruction of an individual's life.

• It is important to distinguish between life histories and life stories. In conducting life histories the researcher must not lose sight of the dimension (society and the individual) of the research.

Life stories are different because they are much more subjective. They are individual stories, and it is the stories we are interested in, we don’t need to make sure what they say is true.

Three types of life (his)tories:
• action
• retrospective
• prospective

Researchers have two options:
• the retrospective narrative
• the structured interview

Collection and analysis of biographies

Researchers and interviewees are both bound by a narrative contract. An individual cannot be elicited to tell his or her story. Rather, one player asks the other to tell his story. If he accepts the terms of the contract then he tells the story of his life. Based on this contract they tell the story.

Social scientists tell the stories of those who are interviewed. The role of the researcher becomes the 'collector' in the data collection phase. The challenge is to collect a biography without exercising any influence on the biography. Therefore we have to understand the context. Our role as analysts and collectors of the information is to reconstitute the context in which the biography is mapped out. One must always be mindful of the conditions in which the materials are collected. Also, it’s important to understand the subjective sequence of the story as it is told to us.

As researchers, we have to develop our listening capacity to identify in the discourse what is untold, and where there are silences. It’s a co-told discourse and therefore the perspective of
the longitudinal is of great importance to us. We can never overemphasize the need to be interested in the way that the respondent is delivering his speech. The scope, rhythm, sense, color of the words used are all underlying in the discourse and it’s important to note these. Feelings should be noted and reconstructed (laughter crying stumbling) the translation must be based on fair meanings.

The longitudinal dimension of life histories is an important phenomenon. Life history narratives can be used very widely. Not only can it teach us more about the strategies that people use to escape poverty, but the extent to mobility in and out of poverty. Longitudinal analysis makes it possible for us to pinpoint where things happen, what the links are and how they are reconstituted. When the individual tells us their story, they enter a lot of players into the story, positioning them in the story. Poverty is not only material destitution but it may go hand in hand with relational destitutions (network poor). This is extreme impoverishment, experienced by the stigmatized, the excluded, the disaffiliated. We can also talk of ‘reaffiliation’—a person may loose certain links but gain others.

Biography is a position taken on the analysis of intersubjectivities. The feeling of the players is fundamental; it is a key aspect for biographical analysis. We cannot work only on things that are intangible. Intersubjectivity shows the trajectory of the players; the breaks in their life. The feelings of the players are as important as the facts that come out of the research.

He insists on a structural analysis of poverty. The life trajectory of the individual shows the structural nature of poverty, and highlights where and how inequality features. The function of biography is not to describe but to analyze and be used to create change.

Question and Answer

**Question:** To what extent is the narrative contract compromised when the research question is very clear?

**Questions:** We have been looking for ways at addressing the future in our work—always hazardous as social scientists—but I think this gives us a pretty straightforward way of going about it, by focusing on the interviewee's project, aspiration, future plans and strategies. Can we explore this further?

**Response:** Biographies are a conscious reconstitution of history. We should not be seeking the truth, but rather to glean from the respondent’s own interpretation of their life and the events within it what the truth is. This is completely different! The silences in a transcript are very interesting. Noting exaggerations in an interview is also useful. If someone exaggerates, it's personal, that's the image he wants to put forth. The way one looks at their own status—it says a lot about what that person thinks of themselves/sees themselves. We can also use other biographies or interviews (along with other tools) to reveal the persons understanding of themselves and their own reality. The language used is very important, as the respondents choice of words, and how they express themselves, will correspond to the person’s own understanding of themselves. The researcher should always maintain a neutral position, but a researcher can and should push respondents to be as open as possible. One way of doing this is by inquiring about the context of the individual’s life. This requires gaining the trust and confidence of the respondent. However, there will always be silences in a life (hi)story and the researcher should be aware of these silences.

A key element: to avoid anecdote. We try to avoid anecdotal tales. We want to reconstruct the lives of people that we interview; in the details of their lives. Previously we were discussing how to best manage time—optimal ignorance—in the biographic analysis we part from optimal
ignorance. And as we are doing an exploration the extent of detail we need to go into will be revealed in the process. Biography takes more time. Unless we have a very good knowledge of the milieu, I answer the question that to the overstatements (space and scale) when we deal with life stories and histories it is the life space of the player that we are interested in, which is not an immediate space, but a spaced in its broad configuration. When the player talks of his life he does not circumscribe it to a certain place but speaks of it in general (the respondent does not box their life into certain constraints—but researchers do—the constraints they desire). What representation of these spaces is shown through the narrative? What can we discern of the relationship between the individual and their surroundings; with slums/secondary towns/ and the relationships within an area? These are what I referred to previously as territorial narratives.

In response to a question of whether it is acceptable to use surveyors or translators. There might be a wealth of information, but we must ensure that we capture the words that a person uses to express himself or herself. In some of my most recent research (to be published in a book soon) which deals with how the middle classes are falling into poverty since the 1990s and as a result of policy changes associated with Structural Adjustment Programs, the biographical method really gets at how the experience of sliding into poverty is experienced by the people. How people fall into poverty can be identified in the narrative (for example, as a result of the head of the household falling ill) and the words that they use and the way they describe things in the narrative/discourse really speak to this.

Q: There seems to be a lot of silence about the negative aspects of life stories; and on how to best approach these in the interview process? There are things that the interviewee will not speak of directly but which will transpire in the interview. How can we look into the negative aspects of life histories?

Q: How can we best use life histories to reveal trends and following from this, make more theoretical generalizations?

Q: Regarding how to identify the point of saturation, how do we define an occurrence of meaning and when there has been enough?? Is this responsibility left to the researcher alone?

Q: What are the ideal types we have in mind before we start off, and how does this compromise the researcher? How do we deal with researcher bias; the expectation that we will find what we are looking for and how this affects how we reconstitute the life history to suit research needs?

Q: Regarding typologies of biographies of life stories; can we concentrate a bit more on method; how they have been elaborated and so on and so forth.

Response:

With regards to the analysis and interpretive process, the typologies in our research were formulated in a sort of circular or recursive way, between the transcripts (data) and elements that we thought were important (relevant to the literature as well as from the research, what we thought had emerged so far). The useful thing about a typology is that it requires some hermeneutical analysis and interpretation from the researcher.

Q: At one point in your presentation you said it was very important to make a record of the exact words people use and also the inflection behind these words. In the work I’ve done I commonly work through a translator, so that is not possible. In a way I’m losing some richness of detail. But I also think we are trying to achieve different things and using different forms of analysis. You seem to be using the transcript of the interview as a text and doing a hermeneutical analysis, whereas I have been using a different approach; thematic analysis of the issues being
raised. Can we elaborate on the merits and shortcomings of each approach to life histories; thick vs. thin analyses.

Your method really seems to do justice to the complexity of poverty, but how do we use this method to really create change; policy makers don’t want ‘thick descriptions’ and sociological analyses. How do we get around this?

Q. How can we identify the risk of exaggeration? Can we design research to make this less likely?

A. In order to protect the research against the tendency of the individual to exaggerate, or likewise, how to get at issues that the interviewee may not want to discuss in clear terms, we need to identify in our study three orders of reality. As follows:

1. The historical semantical reality should be described
2. Subjective totalization: things that have marked the respondents life
3. What we call ‘written expression’, which refers to the selectivity practiced by the respondent, their choice in what to tell or not to tell, and in what way.

During my PHD studies I was working on land collection. Continually, I met people who in their interviews drew blanks—they only spoke about things they wanted to talk about. They missed out things that were essential to my work and to my assumptions, for example that the transfer of land is a cause of conflict (essential to my analysis). Only through triangulation could I cross cut the information that was not coming forward in the interviews.

Question. How life history work can be used to convince policy makers?

In the CPRC we’ve thought about linking life histories to panel data (so that there is a survey basis) from which a sub-sample is taken. We’ve gone so far as to say that we might want to get a ‘medium sized sample’ of 90 or 100 so that you at least feel more confident about the research and extending its implications to policy makers. In your presentation, you mentioned a sample as large as 1500. I’d like to explore the idea of large samples further; what are the expenses involved, and what challenges must it present to analysis? The time dimension that life histories makes possible (longitudinal) has been taken into account. But what about the scale dimension? This is important in the creation of typologies that can reflect realities, and be brought to policy makers.

Comment: I think it’s important to distinguish that there are different policy audiences; some may only be convinced by large samples whereas others may be convinced by small size and in depth analysis. In my experience, it really varies.

Response: We are not trying to illustrate ready-made discourse. That is not the purpose of life histories.

Counter response:

The boundaries between case studies and life history are blurry indeed. In terms of how we used it, the life history was a component within the case studies, and I also stress that there was articulation with other types of data and focus groups and ways of interviews.