Issues in disseminating findings from life histories

Aim

Having read this Briefing Note, looked at the power point presentation on this topic and having read some of the core readings, you:

- Should have a good understanding of the following issues:
  - The strategies and methods that can be employed to best reach the intended audience of the research.
  - The challenges facing researchers in the process of disseminating findings from life histories.

- Might be considering the following questions:
  - When should qualitative and quantitative data be combined? What are the best methods for doing this and which audiences are most responsive to it?
  - In simplifying data from life histories for policy audiences do we run the risk of objectifying the subject?
  - How will the interview design and structure vary depending on which audience the findings are intended for?
Introduction

Methods used to analyse and present the findings from life history research are diffuse and overlapping. This Briefing Note will explore the various ways that findings from life history interviews can be presented to audiences, as well as the challenges and ethical issues that face researchers in the process of disseminating findings.

Disseminating Findings

As we discussed in Briefing Note 5, the presentation of findings from life histories varies depending on its intended audience. Researchers whose work is aimed at the academic community tend to rely on smaller samples, and are more intent on mining individual interviews for the meanings and truths they convey. Researchers aiming to inform policy tend to design their research so it will be sufficiently robust to meet the needs of policy makers. This may lead them to use life history methods alongside other qualitative and quantitative methods, as this provides the triangulation that policy-makers favour and allow for larger samples (thus avoiding the critique of anecdotalism). Lastly, NGOs, civil society organisations, and development agencies often use the life history method more informally. Anecdotal evidence, or short biographical sketches, used in policy reports or on organisation websites are used to elicit empathy, support for issues, and to demonstrate the success of policies and projects.

The matrix below lays out in brief some of the ways that the findings from life history interviews can be presented and disseminated, depending on the audience the researcher intends to reach. Studies that are directed at an academic audience tend to be less intent on legitimating their work as ‘truth’ or fact-based, and instead be more interested in the subjective ‘truths’ of interviewees. In these publications the text of the interview and its analysis takes up a large part of the work. Others, seeking to influence a range of policy makers, tend to avoid lengthy renditions of the interview text but display the findings in a way that is more accessible to a wider audience, such as by using text boxes or graphical representations. (See the table, below).

Challenges

Researchers have a wide range of choices in how to present findings from life history interviews. The challenge is to employ a method that corresponds best with the scale and form of the study, and one that appeals to the intended audience (ranging from anthropologists to economists), policy analysts, parliamentarians, civil servants, practitioners in donor organisations and NGOs.

One issue confronting life history researchers is that policy audiences are interested in the verifiability of findings. The life history method, as a uniquely subjective approach, raises questions about the ‘truths’ that emerge from findings. Findings vary
depending on the age, sex and circumstances of the respondent and as such may be deemed less 'rigorous' than other forms of data collection. One way that researchers can overcome this challenge is to marry findings from life history interviews with other qualitative or quantitative data, or what is known as triangulation. (See Section 2.3.2 of the Resource Pack, which provides a number of resources on Q-squared methods, which sequence and combine qualitative and quantitative research).

Combining methods presents another set of challenges to researchers, but if done so that each method complements the other, it can be a very effective and compelling way of presenting findings.

Another challenge that researchers using the life history method often confront is how to maintain and preserve respondent anonymity while making the raw life history data available and using analysed material in dissemination. This corresponds with a number of ethical issues that arise in the process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Presentation</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Approach to Collection</th>
<th>Approach to Data Storage &amp; Analysis</th>
<th>Audience</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hermeneutic Analysis</td>
<td>Normally a sample size of under 10.</td>
<td>Taped and transcribed, the interview is seen as a collaborative project. Often the transcripts may be checked by the interviewee, who may be involved in analysis as well.</td>
<td>Narrative as Text. The ‘interactive text’ is studied for its themes, patterns, schema, silences.</td>
<td>Anthropologists, sociologists, linguists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thematic Text Boxes</td>
<td>Normally one text box dedicated to one life history and corresponding with the section under discussion.</td>
<td>Life history interviews. The findings are situated within a larger, contextual framework, often utilising data from other qualitative and quantitative sources.</td>
<td>Interviews are analysed for their content; what they illuminate about a given phenomenon.</td>
<td>Both academic and policy audiences. The aim is easy reading and a concise argument that utilises the life history for specific purposes, such as to influence policy makers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Stories with Key Moments</td>
<td>Uses one life history as a case study.</td>
<td>In depth life history interviews, structured around the key phases or moments in an individual’s life.</td>
<td>Analysed in either the hermeneutical tradition (as above) or to bolster an existing theory or understanding of a phenomenon.</td>
<td>Directed at a variety of audiences, from academics interested in narrative analysis to NGOs and Development Agencies geared at the general public, for example when single cases are used to demonstrate the efficacy of an intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphics</td>
<td>Large sample size.</td>
<td>Focused life history interviews.</td>
<td>Presents findings in a visual form.</td>
<td>Directed at policy makers and a general audience. This innovative approach, is a striking way to demonstrate findings to wide range of audiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References and resources


www.cdr.dk/working_papers/wp-98-10.htm

Sylvester, C. (yr?) Producing Women and Progress in Zimbabwe: Narratives of Identity and Work from the 1980s, Publisher?
