

Reflections on using life history approaches

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What is the life history research method?

- Life histories are generated from qualitative research, interviewing individuals about their lives
- Not one approach, but several
 - Biographical research
 - Life histories
 - Family histories
 - Oral testimonies
- Structured, semi-structured, unstructured
- Can have different aims and be underpinned by different epistemological approaches and theoretical standpoints
 - Focus on narrative, story-telling and language
 - Focus on perceptions of/ interpretations of truth and reality
 - Focus on social relations
 - Focus on empirical exploration of the narrator's life (and the connected lives of household members)
- Interviews can produce
 - Facts (may be generalisable – same pattern revealed by many cases, may be useful as part of a Q2 exercise)
 - Validation of theory
 - Narrative (respondent's unique viewpoint)



Why use life history methods in your work?

- Provides insights into long-term change (social, economic, political)
- Analysis of panel data provides an alternative – but few national panels exist, and they rarely help explain decisions and processes
- Places people at the heart of research
- (Development-related research requires work to contextualise these individual accounts with an exploration of wider economic, social and political factors)
- Allows for the exploration of complexity and inter-relationships (between people and phenomena)
- Allows counter-intuitive findings to emerge
- Generates powerful case studies – useful in policy engagement

Advantages

- Experienced qualitative researchers can quickly & successfully add life history methods to their 'toolbox'
- Powerful method
 - particularly when used in combination with other approaches
 - Generates fascinating (and often unexpected) insights
 - Allows for the counter-intuitive to emerge
 - Produces a wealth of rich data



Easy to use badly, challenging to use well (1)

- When using life history methods you will face a number of questions about research design
 - epistemology? study design? sample size? depth of interview? approach to interview? Q2? with other qualitative methods? with secondary data?
- The outcome of your research is strongly influenced by
 - researcher's disciplinary background, skills, preferences and world view, interpersonal skills - building rapport/ interest in story telling
- When you have 'collected' a life history, whose truth is it? Whose narrative?
 - Does it accurately reflect the facts of the life as lived?
 - Does it emphasise the issues and experiences that the interviewee thinks are important?
 - Does it emphasise the interests and priorities of the interviewer?
- Life histories provide detailed micro-evidence
 - Is it anecdotal? It is unlikely to deliver nationally representative statistics, but has other strengths
- Resource hungry
 - Needs a relatively large amount of (expensive, experienced) researcher time – at each stage



Easy to use badly, challenging to use well (2)

- Analysis = a challenge
 - bias to outliers? (good stories)
 - life history transcripts/ interview notes are not raw data, already part analysed (during interview)
 - the skills of the interviewer are crucial
 - using life history interviews collected by someone else can be difficult – implications for comparative study?
 - quality of further analysis and write up depends very much on the researcher
 - huge volume of material - which approach to use? why? – driven by skills, preferences, audience
 - process of analysis not always clear (uncovering ‘the truth’ or harnessing other people’s stories to tell the tale you want?)
- Presentation of results - decisions to make (which audience to convince, on what issue)



‘A truth’, ‘*the truth*’ – parallel narratives (1)

- Gunga Bai, Kirchali village, SW Madhya Pradesh, India
 - Story 1: Never married. Not allowed to – given task of looking after family home and raising baby brother. Cultivated family land. Sold produce. Persecuted by village – seen as too independent for a woman. Unlucky. Brother has taken all land. Won’t allow her to cultivate any. Hard working - gleans for grain. Keeps chickens. Panchayat chairman steals pension.
 - Story 2: Married twice - rejected twice. Mad as a hatter. Lies. Steals. Dirty and smelly.
- Both give the image of an outcast – but she was seen in the middle of the village with a group of other older women, laughing and talking



‘A truth’, ‘*the truth*’ – parallel narratives (2)

- Older woman, Buwopuwa, Mbale District, E Uganda
 - Story 1: Widowed at 19. Husband was violent so decided to never remarry. Returned to father’s compound. Was given a tiny piece of land. Built her hut, where she lived all her adult life. After initial tension, got on well with her brothers. Had a quiet life, growing crops and relating to her sister-in-laws
 - Story 2: Widowed at 19. Remarried. Rejected after some time – barren. Remarried. Rejected. Remarried. Rejected. Lived all her adult life with different men. Sometimes for very short periods. Nephew ‘collected her home’ recently, when ‘she was too old for such things’ & built her mud hut



Building rapport

- or overstaying your welcome?

- Life history interviews are long (repeat visits or get it done in single sitting?)
- Not everyone has a story “ready made”
 - culturally specific (e.g. India versus Uganda)
 - some people have to be coaxed to talk
 - some people are difficult to shut up!
- Not everyone enjoys telling their story
 - depends on the nature of the community (Zimbabwe)
 - may uncover/ resurrect a distressing past (....and then what?) (empowering or exploitative?)



Selectivity

- post-hoc rationalisation (by respondent)
- recall bias - retrospective (positive or negative) gloss on events
- bias caused by mood/ level of rapport with interviewer
- selection bias (of themes) by interviewer
 - **witchcraft *versus* poverty trajectories and intra household relationships** - death of livestock and several members of the extended household (ascribed to witchcraft). As an interviewer, I focused on how the death of the interviewee's father and loss of livestock affected household well-being, his relationship (as a child) with his new step-father and the long run impact of the shock
 - **friendships and sources of happiness *versus* events/ cause and effect**
 - **issues amenable to development policy (e.g. asset thresholds) *versus* social policy issues (e.g. domestic violence, household fragmentation, mental illness)**



Responding to the accusation of anecdotalism

- Difficult presenting results to some audiences
 - Not nationally representative
 - No measures of statistical significance
 - So, they don't accept that the results are valid/ robust
- How to get around this?
- Accept that there are different schools of thought about what constitutes evidence
- You won't persuade everyone, but life histories can be used to collect data about tangible facts (e.g. asset ownership, inheritance practice) as well as perceptions (relative well-being), processes (*how* a livelihood shock resulted in coping, asset holding and poverty outcomes) and the perceived options/choices of a household and decision-making processes
- Using Q2 analysis can allow you to
 - use case studies from life histories to illustrate (or challenge) findings from panel data
 - explain why certain correlations in the panel are important
 - explain household decisions
 - explain why certain events lead to certain outcomes

