"Biographical methods" is a term commonly used to include a variety of loosely related approaches that draw on the self as a central source: narrative studies, life history, oral history, storytelling, autobiography, life writing, biography, auto/biography, reminiscence, life narrative. Indeed, in their comprehensive overview of the field, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson identify 52 different types of approach (2001). Researchers and writers who work with these traditions tend to work in parallel, often not recognizing each other’s existence, working with their own literary canon. The range of types of data is similarly extensive, including diaries, letters, notebooks, interactive websites, photographs, weblogs and written personal narratives, as well as standard research tools such as interviews, questionnaires and, again, diaries. History, psychology, sociology, social policy, anthropology, literary studies and neurobiology have provided guidance and inspiration in various ways. With so many different forms, disciplinary influences and types of data, how best to give shape and meaning to any approach to managing and interpreting that might be of use to cultural gerontology?

Out of the many biographical approaches, this chapter focuses on three that appear most frequently in the literature and that share the common features of drawing on interviews and interpreting memories of past experience: oral history; the biographical narrative interpretive method (BINM); and narrative analysis.

Biography in ageing research

Gerontologists have traditionally made surprisingly little use of biographical methods. Where the individual older person has been the focus, the approach has tended to be on the psychology of ageing, the ageing mind or changing cognitive states. The idea that the individual’s reflections on their own ageing, or that ageing itself, might be situated in cultural or historical contexts, individually experienced, has come rather late to gerontology. There have of course been significant exceptions. These include Jaber Gubrium in the US, who has emphasized the contribution of individual narratives of ageing in his work (Gubrium 1993) and Peter Coleman in the UK who has consistently sought to draw on life review and reminiscence in his explorations of the psychology of older people (Coleman 1986; Coleman et al. 2013). However, change has been on the way. James Birren, in an edited collection, *Aging and Biography*, noted a rapidly
increasing interest in individual accounts of ageing, arguing that ‘there is something absorbing about reading a personal narrative about a long life and the way in which a person views the experiences of growing up and growing old and puts them into perspective’ (Birren 1996, p. ix). Gerontologists reflecting on their own ageing are rare, but with the popularity of biographical approaches, these too are beginning to emerge. For example, the special issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* includes sixteen prominent critical gerontologists who reflect on the development of gerontology in relation to their own life experience (Ray 2008).

**Three biographical methods**

The turn to a biographical approach in sociological research (Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000) has been accompanied by an extensive literature linking back to humanistic approaches in sociological research and historiography (Thompson 2000; Plummer 2001; Roberts 2002; Seale *et al.* 2004; Thomson 2007; Goodwin 2012). Biographical approaches are popular amongst students and in research in part because they have an immediacy that is both engaging and compelling. They also draw on many of the most telling and enduring epistemological and methodological issues in the human sciences, taking in debates on validity, memory, subjectivity, standpoint, ethics, voice and representivity, amongst others (Chamberlayne *et al.* 2000, p. 3).

The three methods identified share certain antecedents, but with individual differences that bring out the distinctiveness of each. A common starting point is the ‘Chicago School’. During the first 40 years of the twentieth century, members pioneered the collection of testimony and drew on observations under realistic conditions with studies of urban society, poverty and street gangs and migrants (Plummer 2001). An accompanying significant development came with Herbert Mead’s concept of ‘the self’ (1934), which stressed the significance of language, culture and non-verbal communication, emphasizing the roles of social interaction and reflection in the development of the individual’s sense of who they are. He suggested that the self might be understood in relation to an individual’s subjective relationship to social or historical contexts. This challenged approaches that gave primacy to the investigator’s or commentator’s perspective.

Sociology was to take a rather different turn subsequently, towards a more positivist, statistically based methodology and a functionalist driven theorizing on a grand scale. C. Wright Mills’ response to ‘abstracted empiricism’ and ‘grand theory’ was a call for a humanistically informed approach. Writing in the late 1950s and influenced by the narrowness of thought that the Cold War was imposing on US sociologists, he called for ‘a sociological imagination’, which would bring out the interactions between the individual, their biography and wider social structures:

> We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he [sic] lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes . . . to the shaping of this society and to the course of history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. (Mills 1959, p. 6)

Mills’s interdisciplinary embrace of biography has had a lasting influence, and has provided the link between the early days of the Chicago School and later twentieth century developments in European sociology (Treviño 2012). Gerontologists seeking to follow his humanistic approach, situating individual agency and understanding within broader determining structures, of generation, space and time, as well as class, gender and ethnicity, have turned to biography as an appealing methodology.
Oral history

Oral history, researching the past through memory by means of recorded interviews, has a long association with and awareness of the perspective from late life through its engagement with older research participants. In terms of method it is interdisciplinary, embedded as it is within history but drawing on sociological methods of data collection and analysis (Thompson 2000). As a result the interview here is more than simply a tool for extracting information about the past, and is perceived as an object in itself, with particular characteristics produced in the telling of life events. Accusations that in its early years oral history was overly concerned with empiricism and validity (Thomson 2007) have been responded to variously, but most eloquently by Portelli who argued, in the article ‘What makes oral history different’, that ‘it tells us less about events than about their meaning’ (emphases original) and that ‘the unique and precious element which oral sources possess in equal measure is the speaker’s subjectivity’ (1981, p. 67). His emphasis on individual meaning was in keeping with oral history’s partisan approach to history making, using the method to understand experiences of oppression and marginalization and to challenge dominant historical narratives (Frisch 1990; Thompson 2000; Portelli 2003; Abrams 2010; Thomson 2013).

Of all the three methods, oral history has, at least since the early 1980s in the UK, engaged most directly with the worlds of older people, with its focus on practical and beneficial outcomes when older people are encouraged to reminisce (Bornat 2011). This has helped to sensitize oral historians to the contribution that age and gender make to the social relationship of the interview. The recognition of subjectivity as a means to both understand and represent the past has been a significant development. Feminist oral historians took a leading role, with Luisa Passerini’s study of women’s experiences of fascist Italy providing both inspiration and means to exploring and interpreting memory along gender lines (Passerini 1979; Bornat and Diamond 2007). Different approaches have followed. Thomson’s interviews with four women who migrated to Australia in the 1960s were developed as a joint enterprise in remembering, life review and interpretation of personal experience (Thomson 2011). Summerfield was interested in how women’s memories of their lives in the UK during the Second World War are in a dialogue between present and past in which the images of a popular culture of heroism did not always match their experience of enduring those years (Summerfield 1998). Portelli’s oral history of Harlan County, Kentucky, is at once a social, cultural and political history that draws on individual accounts by men and women of generational change in one of the most impoverished and exploited regions of the USA (Portelli 2011).

Biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM)

The second of the three methods is an approach known as the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM), developed in Germany during the 1980s by Fritz Schütze. He was greatly influenced by ‘third generation Chicagoans’ such as Anselm Strauss, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman and others (Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000, p. 58). His interview method and approach to analysis was subsequently refined by Gabriele Rosenthal (2004). This involves the separating out of the chronological story from the experiences and meanings that are also present in the interview responses. The process depends on an understanding of the biographical interview as a process of constant movement between past, present and future, in which the interviewee might not be fully aware of the contexts and influences in their life. Chamberlayne and colleagues developed the method further (Chamberlayne et al. 2000) with a...
systematization of the interview into three ‘subsessions’. Follow-up questions, drawn from a narrative offered in answer to a single opening question asking for an account of the interviewee’s life, are then followed by questions asking for more narrative detail. Finally there is a third subsession in which more experiential themes are developed (Wengraf 2013). From this a psycho-biography is constructed (Wengraf 2001, p. 347) aided by a process of hypothesizing based on a classification of text segments from the transcribed interview. The preference is for groups of people to work together as they explore the accounts presented. This phenomenological approach to understanding biographical data focuses on the individual’s perspective within an observable and knowable historical and structural context and what it is to be the person who is narrating, identifying decisions taken at the various turns and patterns of a life (Wengraf 2001, pp. 305–6).

Chamberlayne and King developed a particular interest in applying the method to theorizing and explaining the impact of social welfare policies by engaging with the subjectivity and agency of welfare recipients, linking private and public spheres as these are experienced, expressed and represented through individual accounts (Chamberlayne and King 2000). Ensuing research (see Wengraf [2013] for a detailed listing) tends to focus on health related topics, migration and social welfare issues with older people: see for example Brannen and colleagues’ study of four-generation families (2004) or Nicholson’s exploration of the researcher’s emotional experience while interviewing an older couple’s experiences of frailty in late old age (2009).

**Narrative analysis**

The third area of biographical activity also traces its origins to the Chicago School. Narrative analysis centres the author as source, but whereas early sociologists generated accounts in order to capture the reality of city life as a source of observation, more recent narratologists such as Catherine Kohler Riessman see the story as a whole greater that the sum of its parts, as a system of ‘sequence and consequence’ (Riessman 2004, p. 706). Andrews and colleagues describe narrative research as ‘a historically-produced theoretical bricolage’ but helpfully offer a categorization into: accounts of experiences of a past event; personal narratives and meanings that are to be discovered in ephemera such as letters, objects, photo albums, speech excerpts; and narratives that emerge from ‘co-construction’ as in shared conversations and dialogue. For all these, an evaluation of the role of the audience is central (Andrews *et al.* 2008, p. 4–5; see also Riessman 2008). Narrative researchers identify a difference between researchers who are interested in how people use or perform narratives and those for whom narratives are of interest for what they reveal of unconscious motivations. They point to a division between ‘big’ and ‘small’ narratives: the micro snippet as opposed to a life history. Finally, they identify the influence of a poststructuralist approach that emphasizes subjectivity, the production of narratives, the identification of silences and the influence of power in the forming of narratives (Andrews *et al.* 2008, pp. 4–9; see also Riessman 2008).

For Riessman, what is essential in any approach to narrative analysis is that the ‘teller’ is kept at the centre with analysis ‘starting from the inside’ but not ignoring the influence of power in determining what is said, by whom and how (Riessman 1993). In all this, the perspective of the interpreter—their particular theoretical stance, ‘cultural habitus’ (Hammersley 1997) and personal history—will play a part. An example of this approach is Andrews’s study of political activists that links history and biography in case studies from four countries, the UK, USA, Germany and South Africa, as she considers lifelong commitment to causes (Andrews 2007).
Comparing the three methods

All three of the approaches that I have briefly outlined make innovative and creative contributions to the development of biographical methods. Each places emphasis on the interview as an example of social interaction, stressing the contribution of reflexivity and the significance of difference; each places emphasis on subjectivity and insights derived from recognition of meanings and emotions on both sides of the dialogue. Context too has a value that is incorporated into analysis with the varied temporalities of contexts coming into play as memory of times past interweaves with present and future time. However, there are also differences, and this last part of the chapter will focus on these, with examples from the author’s own work.

The interviewer–interviewee relationship

Each approach positions the interviewer and interviewee rather differently in relation to one another. BNIM’s separation of interviewer and interviewee, through the privileging of the interviewee’s account in the first phase and the interviewer’s in the second, excludes the possibility of including responsive interactions or dialogic elements. Narrative analysis, in its focus on the structure of the account, also diminishes the dialogic aspects emergent in an interview, with evidence of the interviewee’s presence typically being excised from the text being analyzed once the structure of the account becomes the main focus. An oral history approach, in contrast, sees the interviewer as an integral part of the data generation process and as having a presence that requires acknowledgement (Portelli 1997; Bornat 2004).

The dialogic nature of an oral history approach can play a significant part in old age research, as an example from the Timescapes programme’s ‘The Oldest Generation’ project shows. This involved interviewing people over 75 about family life and their relationships with younger family members, alongside a diary of their activities kept by another member of the family. In the main these interviews presented wholly positive accounts of early experiences, family building and transitions into late life. What was told could be in some way owned by the family (Bornat and Bytheway 2012). Difficult episodes, such as deaths of children, would have to be included in ways that were acceptable to this wider audience and within the context of the interview and the project overall. One woman found a way to deal with the difficult subject of her son’s suicide by telling the story of his death from multiple perspectives within the family and from within her own life and within the interview dialogue. This was a story that she doubtless would have told herself many times but perhaps not in this way, for, as Plummer argues, oral history and life history interviews draw on ‘researched and solicited stories . . . [that] do not naturalistically occur in everyday life; rather they have to be seduced, coaxed and interrogated out of subjects’ (Plummer 2001, p. 28). What emerged was the product of a dialogic partnership, which was context dependent yet met her needs as narrator, while providing the project with insights into the resources that she, a mother and grandmother in late life, is able to draw on to deal with an existential blow.

Making use of memory

A further distinction between the three methods comes with the different ways in which each makes use of memory. Memory plays a function in the present and is as much about telling stories, bearing witness or confessing to past involvements and actions as it is about establishing the identity of the self in the present. It draws on and engages with collective representations and
can change according to audience, stimuli and time of life (Draaisma 2004). While providing a window on the past, with eyewitness accounts of events and experiences, recall by older people can be multi-faceted in the temporalities that it evokes and draws on. Here for example is a South Asian overseas-trained doctor reflecting on his experience as a geriatrician working in the UK. On being asked as part of an interview about his career, if he thought his background and experience shaped the way he wanted to care for older people, he answered:

I don’t know. But I felt [for] them and look at them when they were young and pretty and the way they talk about driving their ambulance, the women, and working at the armaments and fighting for the vote, which the world enjoys. I get respect. (Dr L028, born India, 1927, came to UK 1953, interviewed for ‘Overseas-trained South Asian doctors and the development of geriatric medicine’, ESRC grant reference number: RES-062-23-0514. Deposited at the British Library, catalogue no. C1356/31).

Within his account are not only a doctor’s perception, his feelings and admiration for his patients, but also their life histories and the history of the twentieth century. In such ways oral history offers us insights into the ways in which memory is used in late life, providing us with access to experiences that might otherwise be unreachable, not being documented or even recognized as having value. Neither BNIM nor narrative analysis, with their focus on the psycho-social and narrative form, gives the same value to memory as an individual and social practice demonstrating individual agency as well as providing unique empirical content.

**Interviewee voice**

The last distinction concerns the ways the three approaches position the interpreter in relation to the originator of the data, the interviewee. Oral history from early on has positioned itself as having a democratic purpose (Frisch 1990; Thomson 2007). Thus the memories of older people and their modes of recall are prized for their authenticity and their challenges to dominant accounts of the past. The practice is valued for the opportunity it presents to reverse inequalities of age, gender and ethnicity (Thompson 2000). What has emerged is a practice that seeks to maintain the integrity of the original interview and of the interviewee by maintaining interpretive distance. When differences of age are added to gender or ethnicity, this becomes of even greater significance. This does not rule out empathy, an appreciation of the subjectivity of the interviewee or the identification of silences or spaces in accounts, as Butalia’s investigation into the ‘indescribable’ (1998, p. 360) experiences of Partition so well exemplifies. To identify the subjectivity of interviewees, to put oneself in their place, to draw out understandings that are not necessarily articulated in the words of the transcript are all recognizable and shared interpretive practices. But to go beyond this and to seek out subconscious motivations or ways of thinking is surely over-interpretation and risks distancing interviewees from their own words. So, for example, BNIM’s psychodynamic approach to data analysis, which involves not being ‘seduced by the interviewee’s current (and us-directed) story’ and constructing one’s own account of the “objective events” that have marked the person’s life, of the event structures that provide the bigger and smaller contexts of the telling of the story (Wengraf 2013, p. 199), is distant from an oral history practice that both seeks and recognizes the effects of empathy. Similarly, to seek out causes and consequences by interpreting in narrative, storied, forms is to risk imposing a framework of a different order. As Borland so honestly and eloquently asks, based on the experience of interviewing her grandmother (Borland 1991), how far should an analysis be taken if it runs the risk of rendering a life unrecognizable to the research participant?
Conclusion

This review of biographical methods used in ageing research has focused on three approaches: oral history, the biographical interpretive method and narrative analysis. These tend to be the most popular amongst researchers who seek ways to generate and to understand individual life experience. They differ in relation to the nature of the interviewer–interviewee relationship, how memory is used and how the interviewee’s voice is interpreted. Each also traces its development from the Chicago School of early twentieth century sociology, though again each has taken a different path, influenced by European traditions of research and philosophy. So far as research into age and ageing is concerned these three approaches make contrasting offers. BNIM invites interpretations that draw out unconsciously expressed motives and seek to emphasize the development of subjectivities within historical contexts. Narrative analysis focuses on the construction and role of the story in explaining and even determining lives. Both draw on the long view, emphasizing the importance of reflection over time and across contexts. Oral history, with its focus on power inequalities in the interview, its understanding of the interview as a dialogue and its focus on memory as source and as process, perhaps offers more to the researcher who is interested in researching experiences of ageing and the effects of time and place on how accounts are generated while preserving the authority of the speaker.

References


