

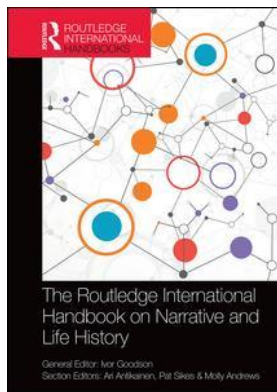
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.104

On: 24 Sep 2021

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History

Ivor Goodson, Ari Antikainen, Pat Sikes, Molly Andrews

The Story of Life History

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315768199.ch2>

Ivor Goodson

Published online on: 25 Oct 2016

How to cite :- Ivor Goodson. 25 Oct 2016, *The Story of Life History from:* The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History Routledge

Accessed on: 24 Sep 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315768199.ch2>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

2

THE STORY OF LIFE HISTORY

Ivor Goodson

UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON

Searching for the origins of the life history method, we found that the first life histories, in the form of autobiographies of Native American chiefs, were collected by anthropologists at the beginning of the century (e.g. Barrett, 1906; Radin, 1920). Since then, sociologists and other scholars working in the humanities have increasingly adopted the approach, although its popularity and acceptance as a research strategy has tended to wax and wane. Life history and other biographical and narrative approaches are now widely seen as having a great deal to offer, and we argue that they should be employed in identity research. In examining their scholarly fate, however, it is necessary to scrutinize their use to date within sociology, which has been a major battleground in their evolution.

For sociologists, the main landmark in the development of life history methods came in the 1920s, following the publication of Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) mammoth study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. In exploring the experience of Polish peasants migrating to the United States, Thomas and Znaniecki relied mainly on migrants' autobiographical accounts, alongside extant diaries and letters. For these authors, life histories were the data par excellence of the social scientist, and they presented a strident case for using life histories above all other methods:

In analyzing the experiences and attitudes of an individual, we always reach data and elementary facts which are exclusively limited to this individual's personality, but can be treated as mere incidences of more or less general classes of data or facts, and can thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming. Whether we draw our materials for sociological analysis from detailed life records of concrete individuals or from the observation of mass phenomena, the problems of sociological analysis are the same. But even when we are searching for abstract laws, life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material, and if social science has to use other materials at all it is only because of the practical difficulty of obtaining at the moment a sufficient number of such records to cover the totality of sociological problems, and of the enormous amount of work demanded for an adequate analysis of all the personal materials necessary to characterise the life of a social group. If we are forced to use mass phenomena as material, or any kind of happenings taken without regard to the life

histories of the individuals who participated, it is a defect, not an advantage, of our present sociological method.

(*Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920, pp. 1831–3*)

Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) pioneering work established the life history as a bona fide research device. (Although as Miller, 2000, pointed out, its foundations can be seen in the notion of historicism as expressed by Wilhelm Dilthey.) The prominent position of the life history was further consolidated by the flourishing tradition of sociological research stimulated at Chicago, particularly by Robert Park.

In the range of studies of city life completed under Park, the life history method was strongly in evidence: *The Gang* (Thrasher, 1928), *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (Zorbaugh, 1929), *The Hobo* (Anderson, 1923), and *The Ghetto* (Wirth, 1928). However, perhaps the zenith was reached in the 1930s with publications such as Shaw's (1930) account of a mugger, *The Jack-Roller*, and Sutherland's *The Professional Thief* (Cornwell & Sutherland, 1937). Becker's (1970) comments on Shaw's study underline one of the major strengths of the life history method:

By providing this kind of voice from a culture and situation that are ordinarily not known to intellectuals generally and to sociologists in particular, The Jack Roller enables us to improve our theories at the most profound level: by putting ourselves in Stanley's skin, we can feel and become aware of the deep biases about such people that ordinarily permeate our thinking and shape the kinds of problems we investigate. By truly entering into Stanley's life, we can begin to see what we take for granted (and ought not to) in designing our research – what kinds of assumptions about delinquents, slums and Poles are embedded in the way we set the questions we study.

(*Becker, 1970, p. 71*)

Becker's (1970) argument went to the heart of the appeal of life history methods at their best, for life history data disrupt the normal assumptions of what is known by intellectuals in general and sociologists in particular. Conducted successfully, the life history forces a confrontation with other people's subjective perceptions. This confrontation can be avoided, and so often is avoided in many other social scientific methods: One only has to think of the common rush to the quantitative indicator or theoretical construct, to the statistical table or the ideal type. This sidesteps the messy confrontation with human subjectivity, which we believe should comprise the heartland of the sociological enterprise. Behind or coterminous with this methodological sidestep, there is often a profound substantive and political sidestep. In the avoidance of human subjectivity, quantitative assessment and theoretical commentaries can so easily service powerful constituencies within the social and economic order. This tendency to favour and support existing power structures is always a potential problem in social science.

From the statement about "putting ourselves in Stanley's skin," Becker (1970) went on to assert that Stanley's story offered the possibility "to begin to ask questions about delinquency from the point of view of the delinquent" (p. 71). From this it followed that questions will be asked, not from the point of view of the powerful actors but rather from the perspective of those who are acted on in professional transactions. These are some important reasons why, beyond the issues of methodological debate, life history methods might be unpopular in some quarters. Life history, by its nature, asserts and insists that power should listen to the people it claims to serve, as Becker (1970) noted:

If we take Stanley seriously, as his story must impel us to do, we might well raise a series of questions that have been relatively little studied – questions about the people who

deal with delinquents, the tactics they use, their suppositions about the world, and the constraints and pressures they are subject to.

(Becker, 1970, p. 71)

However, this contention should be read in the light of Shaw's (1930) own "early warning" in his preface, where he cautioned the reader against drawing conclusions about general causes of delinquency on the basis of a single case record. One of the best early attempts to analyze the methodological base of the life history method was Dollard's (1949) *Criteria for the Life History*. Foreshadowing Becker, he argued that "detailed studies of the lives of individuals will reveal new perspectives on the culture as a whole which are not accessible when one remains on the formal cross sectional plane of observation" (p. 4). Dollard's arguments have a somewhat familiar ring, perhaps reflecting the influence of George Herbert Mead. He noted that

as soon as we take the post of observer on the cultural level the individual is lost in the crowd and our concepts never lead us back to him. After we have 'gone cultural' we experience the person as a fragment of a (derived) culture pattern, as a marionette dancing on the strings of (reified) culture forms.

(Dollard, 1949, p. 5)

In contrast to this, the life historian "can see his [sic] life history subject as a link in a chain of social transmission" (Dollard, 1949, p. 5). This linkage should ensure that life history methods will ameliorate the 'presentism' that exists in so much sociological theory and a good deal of symbolic inter-actionism. Dollard described this linkage between historical past, present, and future:

There were links before him from which he acquired his present culture. Other links will follow him to which he will pass on the current of tradition. The life history attempts to describe a unit in that process: it is a study of one of the strands of a complicated collective life which has historical continuity.

(Dollard, 1949, p. 15)

Dollard (1949) was especially good, although perhaps unfashionably polemical, in his discussion of the tension between what might be called the cultural legacy, the weight of collective tradition and expectation, and the individual's unique history and capacity for interpretation and action. By focusing on this tension, Dollard argued, the life history offers a way of exploring the relationship between the culture, the social structure, and individual lives. Thus, Dollard believed that in the best life history work:

we must constantly keep in mind the situation both as defined by others and by the subject; such a history will not only define both versions but let us see clearly the pressure of the formal situation and the force of the inner private definition of the situation.

(Dollard, 1949, p. 32)

Dollard (1949) saw this resolution, or the attempt to address a common tension, as valuable because "whenever we encounter difference between our official or average or cultural expectation of action in a 'situation' and the actual conduct of the person this indicates the presence of a private interpretation" (p. 32).

In fact, Dollard (1949) was writing sometime after a decline set in for life history methods (an unfortunate side effect of which is that Dollard's work is not as well known as it should be).

After reaching its peak in the 1930s, the life history approach fell from grace and was largely abandoned by social scientists. At first this was because the increasingly powerful advocacy of statistical methods gained a growing number of adherents among sociologists, but it was perhaps also because, among ethnographically inclined sociologists, more emphasis came to be placed on situation than on biography as the basis for understanding human behavior.

In the 1970s, something of a 'minor resurgence' (Plummer, 1990) was observed, particularly and significantly, at first, among deviancy sociologists. Thus, there were studies of a transsexual (Bogdan, 1974), a professional fence (Klockars, 1975), and once again, with a fine sense of history following Shaw's (1930) study, a professional thief (Chambliss, 1972).

Although life history methods have long been popular with journalists-cum-sociologists like Studs Terkel in the United States, Jeremy Seabrook and Ronald Blythe in the United Kingdom, and a growing band of "oral historians" (Thompson, 1978, 1988), Bertaux's (1981) collection, *Biography and Society*, marked a significant step in the academic rehabilitation of the approach. This book was closely followed by Plummer's (1983, revised in 2000) important *Documents of Life*. Tierney's (1998) special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* is also of interest.

Feminist researchers have been particularly vocal in their support of the approach, mainly because of the way in which it can be used to give expression to, and in celebration of, hidden or 'silenced' lives (cf. McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993) – lives lived privately and without public accomplishment, the sorts of lives most women (and, it has to be said, most men) live (cf. Gluck & Patai, 1991; Middleton, 1992, 1997; Munro, 1998; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001; Stanley, 1990, 1992; Weiler & Middleton, 1999). Similarly, those who research issues and aspects of sexuality, notably Plummer (1995) and Sparkes (1994), also have made considerable use of the approach.

Within the field of educational studies, working with teachers and pupils who are, again, arguably marginal in terms of social power, life history has been seen as particularly useful and appropriate because, as Bullough (1998) pointed out, "public and private cannot be separated in teaching. The person comes through when teaching" (pp. 20–1). Life history does not ask for such separation; indeed, it demands holism. The growing number of life history studies dealing with educational topics is testimony to this (e.g., Ball & Goodson, 1985; Casey, 1993; Erben, 1998; Goodson, 1992; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Kridel, 1998; Middleton, 1993; Osler, 1997; Sikes, 1997; Sikes et al., 1985).

Among these scholars, albeit in marginal or fragmented groups, a debate is underway that promises a thorough re-examination of the potential of life history methods. Before considering the contemporary appeal of the life history method, however, it is important to discover why it was eclipsed for so long by social theory, social survey, and participant observation. In this examination, we distinguish fundamental methodological stumbling blocks from professional, micro-political, and personal reasons for the decline of life history work. Often the latter are far more important than participants in the methodological 'paradigm wars' acknowledge.

Reasons for the decline of the life history in early sociological study

By 1966, Becker (1970) was able to summarize the fate of the life history method among American sociologists, stating that "given the variety of scientific uses to which the life history may be put, one must wonder at the relative neglect into which it has fallen" (Becker, 1970, pp. 71–2).

Becker (1970) noted that sociologists have never given up life histories altogether, but they have not made it one of their standard research tools. The general pattern was, and by and large continues to be, that "they know of life history studies and assign them for their students to read.

But they do not ordinarily think of gathering life history documents or of making the technique part of their research approach” (pp. 71–2).

The reasons for the decline of life history methods are partly specific to the Chicago School. From the late 1920s, life histories came increasingly under fire as the debate within the department between the virtues of case study (and life histories) and statistical techniques intensified. Faris (1967), in his study of the Chicago School, recorded a landmark within this debate:

To test this issue, Stouffer had hundreds of students write autobiographies instructing them to include everything in their life experiences relating to school usage and the prohibition law. Each of these autobiographies was read by a panel of persons presumed to be qualified in life history research, and for each subject the reader indicated on a scaled line the position of the subject’s attitude regarding prohibition. Inter reader agreement was found to be satisfactory. Each of the same subjects had also filled out a questionnaire that formed a scale of the Thurstone type. The close agreement of the scale measurement of each subject’s attitude with the reader’s estimate of the life history indicated that, as far as the scale score was concerned, nothing was gained by the far more lengthy and laborious process of writing and judging a life history.

(Faris, 1967, pp. 114–15)¹

Even within Chicago School case study work, use of the life history declined against other ethnographic devices, notably participant observation. One element of the explanation of this may lie in the orientations of Blumer and Hughes. These two sociologists provide a bridge between the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s and those Matza has termed the neo-Chicagoans, such as Becker (1970).

Blumer’s symbolic inter-actionism placed primary emphasis on process and situation, whereas explanations in terms of biography, like those in terms of social structural forces, were regarded with considerable suspicion. Hughes’s comparative approach to the study of occupations may have tended to limit interest in biography in favor of a concern with the typical problems faced by occupational practitioners and the strategies they adopt for dealing with them. An additional factor that hastened the decline of the methodological eclecticism of Chicago sociology in which the life history played a central role was the decline of Chicago itself as a dominant centre for sociological studies.

The fate of life history methods has been inextricably linked to the historical emergence of sociology as a discipline. Hence, the methodological weaknesses of the approach were set against the need to develop abstract theory. When sociology was highly concerned with providing detailed accounts of specific communities, institutions, or organizations, such weaknesses were clearly of less account. However, in the life history of sociology, the pervasive drift of academic disciplines toward abstract theory has been irresistible; in this evolutionary imperative it is not difficult to discern the desire of sociologists to gain parity of esteem with other academic disciplines. The resulting pattern of mainstream sociology meant that sociologists came to pursue “data formulated in the abstract categories of their own theories rather than in the categories that seemed most relevant to the people they studied” (Becker, 1970, p. 72).

Along with the move toward abstract academic theory, sociological method became more professional. Essentially, this led toward a model of single study research, defined by Becker (1970) in this way:

I use the term to refer to research projects that are conceived of as self-sufficient and self-contained, which provide all the evidence one needs to accept or reject the

conclusions they proffer. The single study is integrated with the main body of knowledge in the following way: it derives its hypotheses from an inspection of what is already known: then, after the research is completed, if those hypotheses have been demonstrated, they are added to the wall of what is already scientifically known and used as the basis for further studies. The important point is that the researcher's hypothesis is either proved or disproved on the basis of what he has discovered in doing that one piece of research.

(Becker, 1970, p. 72)

The imperative toward this pattern of sociological research can be clearly evidenced in the traditions and organizational format of emergent professional sociology. The PhD student must define and test a hypothesis; the journal article must test the author's own or other academics' hypotheses; the research project or programme must state the generalizable aims and locate the burden of what has to be proved. However, this dominant experimental model, so fruitful in analogies with other sciences and, hence, so crucial in legitimating sociology as a full-fledged academic discipline, led to the neglect of sociology's full range of methodology and data sources.

It has led people to ignore the other functions of research and particularly to ignore the contribution made by one study to an overall research enterprise even when the study, considered in isolation, produced no definitive results of its own. Because, by these criteria, the life history did not produce definitive results, people have been at a loss to make anything of it and by and large have declined to invest the time and effort necessary to acquire life history documents (Becker, 1970, p. 73).

Becker (1970) ended by holding out the hope that sociologists would, in the future, develop a "further understanding of the complexity of the scientific enterprise" (p. 73) and that this would rehabilitate the life history method and lead to a new range of life history documents as generative as those produced by the Chicago sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the period following Becker's strictures in 1970, sociology was subject to a number of new directions that sought to re-embrace some of the elements lost in the positivist, theory-testing models (Cuff & Payne, 1979; Morris, 1977). One new direction that clearly stressed biography, the phenomenological sociology of Berger and Luckmann (Berger, 1963; Berger & Luckmann, 1967), actually resulted in little empirical work.

Hence, research in interpretive sociology has displayed a heavy emphasis on situation under the influence of inter-actionism and ethno-methodology. The paradox is that these new directions in sociology moved away from the positivist model directly to situation and occasion; as a result, life history and biography have tended to remain at the sidelines of the sociological enterprise. For instance, inter-actionist studies have focused on the perspectives and definitions emerging among groups of actors in particular situations, the backdrop to this presented as a somewhat monolithic structural or cultural legacy that constrains, in a rather disconnected manner, the actors' potentialities. In overreacting to more deterministic models, this situational emphasis most commonly fails to make any connection with historical process. Thus, inter-actionists retained their interest in the meaning objects had for actors, but these meanings increasingly came to be seen as collectively generated to deal with specific situations, rather than as the product of individual or even collective biography.

Viewing sociology's evolution over half a century or so provides a number of insights into the life history method. First, as sociologists began to take seriously their social scientific pursuit of generalizable facts and the development of abstract theory, life history work came to be seen as having serious methodological flaws. In addition, because life history studies often appeared

to be only 'telling tales,' these methodological reservations were enhanced by the generally low status of this as an academic or scientific exercise. Paradoxically, even when antidotes to the experimental model of sociology developed, these took the form of inter-actionism and ethno-methodology, both of which stressed situation and occasion rather than biography and background. Moreover, because these new directions had status problems of their own, life history work was unattractive on this count as well. At the conference where Goodson's (1983) early work on life history was originally delivered as a seminar paper, a classroom inter-actionist rejected the exhortation to consider life history work by saying "we should not suggest new methodologies of this sort because of the problem of our academic careers. Christ! Ethnography is low status enough as it is."

Set against the life history of the aspirant academic, keen to make a career in the academy as it is or as it has been shaped and ordered, we clearly see the unattractiveness of the life history method at particular stages in the evolution of sociology. However, by the 1980s, matters were beginning to change markedly in ways that have led to a re-embracing of life history methods.

From modernism to postmodernism

Under modernism, life history languished because it persistently failed the 'objectivity tests': Numbers were not collected and statistical aggregation was not produced and because studies were not judged to be representative or exemplary, contributions to theory remained parsimonious. In the historical aspiration to be a social science, life history failed its membership test.

However, as Harvey (1989) and others documented, the "condition of post-modernity" provides both new dilemmas and new directions. In some ways, the new possibilities invert the previous deficits that were perceived in life history work. In moving from objectivities to subjectivities, the way is open for new prospects for life history work and, as a result, a range of new studies have begun to appear (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000). As is often the case, educational studies have been slow to follow new directions, but recently new work has begun to emerge.

Life history work has accompanied the turn to post-modernism and post-structuralism, particularly as evidenced in sociological studies, gender studies, cultural studies, literacy theory, and even psychology. Such work facilitates the move away from modernist master narratives, which are viewed as social productions of the Enlightenment Project. Alongside this move, the notion of a singular, knowable, essential self is judged as part of the social production of individualism, linked to argentic selves in pursuit of progress, knowingness, and emancipation. Assumptions of linearity of chronological time lines and story lines are challenged in favour of more multiple, disrupted notions of subjectivity.

Foucault's work, for instance, focused sociological attention on the way in which institutions such as hospitals and prisons regulate and constitute our subjectivities. Likewise, discourse studies have focused on the role of language in constructing identities in producing textual representations that purport to capture the essential selves of others (Shotter & Gergen, 1989).

These new syntagmas in sociological work have led to a revival in the use of life history work:

The current focus on acknowledging the subjective, multiple and partial nature of human experience has resulted in a revival of life history methodology. What were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representativeness and its subjective nature, are now its greatest strength.

(Munro, 1998, p. 8)

Yet, the post-modern concern with disrupting constructed selves and stories is itself not without difficulty, as Munro (1998) reflectively noted:

In collecting the life histories of women teachers I find myself situated in a paradoxical position. I know that I cannot 'collect' a life. Narrative does not provide a better way to locate truth, but in fact reminds us that all good stories are predicated on the quality of the fiction. We live many lives. Consequently, the life histories in this book do not present neat, chronological accounts of women's lives. This would be an act of betrayal, a distortion, a continued form of "fitting" women's lives into the fictions, categories and cultural norms of patriarchy. Instead, my understanding of a life history suggests that we need to attend to the silences as well as what is said, that we need to attend to how the story is told as well as what is told or not told, and to attend to the tensions and contradictions rather than succumb to the temptations to gloss over these in our desire for 'the' story.

(Munro, 1998, pp. 12–13)

Here, Munro (1998) began to confront the methodological and, indeed, ethical minefield that potentially confronts, confuses, and confounds the researcher and the researched. Fine (1994) wrote of some issues to be confronted:

Self and Other are knottily entangled. This relationship, as lived between researchers and informants, is typically obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance, and laminating the contradictions. Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, persona-logic theorizing, and de-contextualization, we inscribe the 'Other', strain to white out 'Self', and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts.

(Fine 1994, p. 72)

Fine's (1994) warnings are of inestimable value in approaching life history work. However, in the end we do face the inevitable closure of the text that is produced, or are forever caught in the politics of infinite regress where every closure must be re-opened. For Fine warned that the search for the complete and coherent is a delusion; we produce a snapshot of transgressions in process when we write up life history work. Furthermore, the relationship of the researcher and informant is much concerned in the postmodern predilection for "rejection of the unitary subject for a more complex, multiple and contradictory notion of subjectivity" (Munro, 1998, p. 35).

What does such researcher rejection mean in the face of an informant who narrates his or her life as a search for coherence? For it remains the case that many people narrate their lives according to an aspiration for coherence, for a unitary self. Should we, in Munro's (1998) word, "reject" this social construction of self? Rejection is not the issue here, for life history work should, where possible, refuse to play post-modern God. Life history work is interested in the way people actually do narrate their lives, not in the way they should. Here it seeks to avoid the fate of some post-modern fundamentalists.

Life stories then are the starting point for our work. Such stories are, in their nature, already removed from life experiences – they are lives interpreted and made textual. They represent a partial, selective commentary on lived experience. Freeman (1993) explored some of the issues that are raised here:

For what we will have before us are not lives themselves, but rather texts of lives, literary artifacts that generally seek to recount in some fashion what these lives were like. In

this respect, we will be – we must be – at least one step removed from the lives that we will be exploring: we can only proceed with our interpretive efforts on the basis of what has been written, [or related] by those whose lives they are. The basic situation, I hasten to emphasize, obtains not only in the case of literary texts of the sort we will be examining here, but in the case of interviews and the like along with the observation of human action more generally. Interviews, of the sort that social scientists often gather, are themselves texts, and while they may not have quite as much literary flourish as those we buy in bookstores, they are in their own right literary artifacts, taking the form of words, designed to give shape to some feature of experience. As for the observation of human action, the story is actually much the same: human action, which occurs in time and yields consequences the significance of which frequently extend beyond the immediate situation in which it takes place, is itself a kind of text; it is a constellation of meanings which, not unlike literary texts or interviews, calls forth the process of interpretation (see especially Ricoeur, 1981). In any case, the long and short of this brief excursion into ‘textuality’ is that our primary interpretive takeoff point will not be lives as such but the words used to speak them.

(Freeman, 1993, p. 7)

The rendering of lived experience into a life story is one interpretive layer, but the move to life history adds a second layer and a further interpretation. Goodson (1992) wrote about the distinction between Stage 1, in which the informant relates her or his life story, and Stage 2, in which a life history is constructed employing a new range of interviews and documentary data. The move from life story to life history involves the range of methodologies and ethical issues noted earlier. Moving from personal life stories to life histories involves issues of process and power. As Bertaux (1981) noted, “What is really at stake is the relationship between the sociologist and the people who make his [sic] work possible by accepting to be interviewed on their life experiences” (p. 9).

Moving from life story to life history involves a move to account for historical context – a dangerous move, for it offers the researcher considerable colonizing power to locate the life story, with all its inevitable selections, shifts, and silences. Nonetheless, we hold to the need for providing historical contexts for reading life stories.

Dannefer (1992) wrote of the various meanings of context in studying developmental discourse. Here, the concern is to provide communications that cover the social histories and, indeed, social geographies in which life stories are embedded; without contextual commentary on issues of time and space, life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction. This, above all, is the argument for life histories rather than life stories.

Although rightly concerned about the colonizing dangers of contextual commentary, even post-structuralist accounts often end up moving from life stories to life histories, and they confront issues surrounding the changing contexts of time and space. For instance, Middleton’s early work (1992) on women teachers’ lives related a substantive account of one feminist teacher’s pedagogy within the specific socio-cultural setting of post-World War II New Zealand. Likewise, Munro (1998), an avowed feminist post-structuralist, argued that:

Since this study is concerned with placing the lives of women teachers within a broader historical context, historical data regarding the communities and the time period in which they taught were also collected. Although I am not an educational historian an attempt was made to understand both the local history and broader historical context in which these women lived.

(Munro, 1998, p. 11)

The distinction between life stories or narratives and life histories is then a crucial one. By providing contextual data, the life stories can be seen in the light of changing patterns of time and space in testimony and action as social constructions.

Conclusions

The move from modernism to postmodernism presages a concern with objectivity moving toward a primary concern with the way subjectivities are constructed. Echoing this move, life history, whose methods failed the objectivity tests under modernism, has once again come into its own. The way is open for exploring new prospects for life history work. Already this exploration is under way in a range of fields from cultural studies to sociology and education, but it is hoped that the rehabilitation will broaden into the major arenas of the humanities, such as history itself and psychology.

Note

- 1 Although the experiment does raise the question of why one would use the life history method simply to measure attitude. No doubt the autobiographies did contain explanations of why the informants' attitudes were of a particular degree. Such information could be valuable for other purposes than attitude measurement and would, moreover, not be accessible by means of a questionnaire.

References

- Anderson, N. (1923) *The Hobo*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ball, S. & Goodson, I. F. (eds.) (1985) *Teachers' Lives and Careers*. New York: Falmer.
- Barrett, S. (1906) *Geronimo's Story of His Life: Taken Down and Edited by S. M. Barrett*. New York: Duffield.
- Becker, H. (1970) *Sociological Work: Method and Substance*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Berger, P. (1963) *Invitation to Sociology*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Bertaux, D. (1981) *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Bogdan, R. (1974) *Being Different: The Autobiography of Jane Fry*. New York: Wiley.
- Bullough, R. (1998). Musings on life writings: Biography and case study in teacher education. In C. Kridel (ed.) *Writing Educational Biography: Explorations in Qualitative Research*. pp. 19–32. New York: Garland.
- Casey, K. (1993) *I Answer with My Life: Life Histories of Women Teachers Working for Social Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Chambliss, W. (1972) *Boxman: A Professional Thief*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cornwell, C. & Sutherland, E. (1937) *The Professional Thief*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cuff, E. & Payne, G. (1979) *Perspectives in Sociology*. Boston: Allen & Unwin.
- Dannefer, D. (1992) On the conceptualization of context in developmental discourse: Four meanings of context and their implications. In D. Featherman, R. Lerner & M. Perlmutter (eds.) *Life-Span Development and Behaviour*. Vol. 11. pp. 84–110. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (eds.) (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (eds.) (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd edn.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dollard, J. (1949) *Criteria for the Life History*. Magnolia, MA: Peter Smith.
- Erben, M. (1998) Biography and research methods. In M. Erben (ed.) *Biography and Education: A Reader*. pp. 4–17. London: Falmer.
- Faris, R. (1967) *Chicago Sociology*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Fine, M. (1994) Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. pp. 70–82. London: Sage.
- Freeman, M. (1993) *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*. New York: Routledge.
- Gluck, S. & Patai, D. (eds.) (1991) *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge.

- Goodson, I. F. (1983) Life histories and teaching. In M. Hammersley (ed.) *The Ethnography of Schooling*. Driffield, England: Nafferton.
- Goodson, I. F. (ed.) (1992) *Studying Teachers' Lives*. New York: Routledge.
- Goodson, I. F. & Hargreaves, A. (1996) *Teachers' Professional Lives*. London: Falmer.
- Harvey, D. (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. London: Blackwell.
- Klockars, C. (1975) *The Professional Fence*. London: Tavistock.
- Kridel, C. (ed.) (1998) *Writing Educational Biography: Explorations in Qualitative Research*. New York: Garland.
- McLaughlin, D. & Tierney, W. (eds.) (1993) *Naming Silent Lives: Personal Narratives and Processes of Educational Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Middleton, S. (1992) Developing a radical pedagogy: Autobiography of a New Zealand sociologist of women's education. In I. F. Goodson (ed.) *Studying Teachers' Lives*. pp. 18–50. New York: Routledge.
- Middleton, S. (1993) *Educating Feminists: Life Histories and Pedagogy*. New York: Teachers College Press & Sage.
- Middleton, S. (1997) *Disciplining Sexuality: Foucault Life Histories and Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Miller, R. (2000) *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*. London: Sage.
- Morris, M. (1977) *An Excursion into Creative Sociology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Munro, P. (1998) *Subject to Fiction: Women Teachers' Life History Narratives and the Cultural Politics of Resistance*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Osler, A. (1997) *The Education and Careers of Black Teachers: Changing Identities, Changing Lives*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Personal Narratives Group. (eds.) (1989) *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Plummer, K. (1983) *Documents of Life*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Plummer, K. (1990) Herbert Blumer and the life history tradition. *Symbolic Inter-Actionism*. 13. pp. 125–44.
- Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.
- Plummer, K. (2000) *Documents of Life 2* (rev. edn.). London: Sage.
- Radin, I. (1920) Crashing thunder. *Publications in Archaeology and Ethnology*. 26. pp. 381–473.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981) *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Shaw, C. (1930) *The Jack-Roller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shotter, J. & Gergen, K. (1989) *Inquiries in Social Construction Series: Vol. 2. Texts of Identity*. London: Sage.
- Sikes, P. (1997) *Parents Who Teach: Stories from School and from Home*. London: Cassell.
- Sikes, P., Measor, L. & Woods, P. (1985) *Teachers' Careers: Crises and Continuities*. Lewes, England: Falmer.
- Sorrell, G. T. & Montgomery, M. J. (2001) Feminist perspectives on Erikson's theory: Its relevance for contemporary identity development research. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*. 1. (30). pp. 97–128.
- Sparkes, A. (1994) Self, silence and invisibility as a beginning teacher: A life history of lesbian experience. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 15. (1). pp. 93–118.
- Stanley, L. (1990) *Feminist Praxis, Research Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Stanley, L. (1992) *The Auto/Biographical: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Thomas, W. & Znaniecki, F. (1918–1920) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (2nd edn.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thompson, P. (1978) *The Voices of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, P. (1988) *The Voices of the Past: Oral History* (2nd edn.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Thrasher, F. (1928) *The Gang: A Study of 1313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tierney, W. (1998) Life history's history: Subjects foretold. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 4. (1). pp. 49–70.
- Weiler, K. & Middleton, S. (eds.) (1999) *Telling Women's Lives: Narrative Inquiries in the History of Women's Education*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Wirth, L. (1928) *The Ghetto*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zorbaugh, H. (1929) *The Gold Coast and The Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's North Side*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.