ESRC Workshop on Comparative Biographical Research – TCRU, Institute of Education, University of London, 24-25th Nov, 2005

Comparative analysis of cases – using the biographic-narrative interpretive method (BNIM)

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Plan

1. I want first to discuss some issues around producing cases studies and comparing them, with some comments on the policy relevance of case studies. All my examples come from research I have been involved in using BNIM.

2. Two key steps in the way we produce case studies

3. Two cases for you to compare in small groups.

You will then feed back your findings, and discussion will proceed from that, hopefully with quite a bit of time.

1. Shareability

We discussed yesterday that in much European comparative work people talk past each other. Someone cobbles a composite report together without intimate knowledge of others' material, without ever really understanding what other teams have done or how they think. Case studies offer an opportunity to work together, in workshops. This generates not only marvellous insights into specificities of other societies, but also the closeness of creative collaboration.

In the seven country Sostris project we met three times a year over three years for four days each time. We all loved the meetings, which were organised initially around shared interpretation and very soon around comparison of cases. We always felt we were participating in something sociologically and methodologically new and valuable - and this spirit of inquiry and discovery continues in training workshops.

(In Cultures of Care Annette King and I conducted some interviews and supervised others in situ. We worked in German and the project involved several lengthy field trips of 10 and twelve weeks).

Research scope

I will be mentioning four projects, all of which have been wide angled and emergent:

>   Cultures of Care (CofC) 1992-6 - three welfare systems
>   SOSTRIS (Social Strategies in Risk Society, 1996-9) – seven countries
>   Homelessness research 1999-2001 – including training video

Bromley by Bow evaluation 1992-5– an agency study combining biographical with observation methods.

Annette King, Susanne Rupp, Chris Curran and Stefanie Buckner have been key researchers on these projects.

Many research projects have a much tighter focus, as we saw in the careful designs of outlined yesterday by Ann and Julia and Catherine – as is the case in Maria's research.

In CofC we explored home caring as a window on cross-cultural comparisons of the informal sphere. In Sostris we had six social groups (unemployed graduates, early retired, single parents, ethnic minorities, unqualified youth, ex-traditional workers). We wanted a breadth of view of people's strategies in the context of dramatic social transformation in Europe – we weren't experts in the specific groups. This width and looseness may affect the way we have compared cases.

I think ways of comparing cases is a point of difference among users of biographical methods, and I would love to know how other projects have done this.

How to compare cases

Mike Rustin's chapter 'Reflections on the biographical turn' in the collection *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (2000) came out of discussions in the Sostris project. It is a good introduction to the idea of single case analysis as opposed to using cases for typologies. Not that we were doing single case analysis, since each team did six to eight interviews in each of the six categories, from which one for each category in each country was chosen to analyse in depth. So between us we had 42 in-depth interpretations and about 252 back-up cases. Nevertheless we were to quite an extent treating each case in its own right. We were interested in the way a single case could generate sociological insights rather than in producing sociological laws – as Bertaux clearly intends in the quote Ann used yesterday. This use of case studies is similar to the use of key characters in plays or novels.

(Mike discusses some of this and reviews how social science, by allying with natural science, cut itself off from the many disciplines that do use single cases, from law and medicine to psychoanalysis and literature.)

I remember in the Cultures of Care project wondering rather despairingly how to compare diamonds, which is what cases seemed to be. If you started on a particular aspect it would seem to distort the whole. In that project, and Annette was brilliant at this, we compared cases around some central dynamic, such as power in care relationships, or coming to terms with disability. Until that point we had been feeling rather disappointed at the psychological emphasis in our emergent analysis of cases, wondering how this was going to serve our social policy purpose of comparing the informal spheres underlying different welfare systems. At the point of comparing whole cases, however, the system features jumped out at us. There was similar initial frustration in Sostris –our French colleague waving his arms and saying 'we're not here to do psychoanalysis!'

In Sostris we adopted a practice in meetings of presenting whole cases, two by two. We compared each pair in small groups, trying to hold both the whole case and its specific details in mind. This involves a constant interplay of levels. Mike gives an example of an Ibsen play where you can unravel the whole plot from a buttonhole on a waistcoat. It seems to involve imagination and negative capability (Keats) as much as cognitive thought – and I have argued at various times for greater appreciation of the role of imagination in research (Chamberlayne 2004).

This line of argument became much more elaborated in the BBB study, from two influences (Froggett 2005).

- the psychodynamic approach to observation brought by Lynn Froggett, which uses researcher hunches and fantasies as important data in trying to understand hidden dynamics – consciously building meandering reflective space into meetings, again moving between the whole and the part in attempting to synthesise, and look for enactment and mirroring
- thinking about artistic process. Initially we focused on stories, which the Centre used a great deal. But the Centre also had art in every fibre of its being. It wasn't visual analysis which helped us, but understanding artistic process as emergence and synthesis.

The concept of syncretism comes from Piaget, but we came across it in Ehrenzweig (1967). Piaget contrasts it with analytic thinking, which is concerned with breaking phenomena into categories. Children move on to this around the age of eight. Ehrenzweig values syncretistic thinking as a key to creativity.

This quote (OHP) is from an article by Lynn Froggett:

> "Syncretistic perception is relatively undifferentiated, taking in complex structures in a single sweep. It involves the scanning of whole objects and their interrelated parts without focussing in on a particular detail or dominant pattern. Whereas analysis breaks up the object into component parts or extracts a gestalt, syncretism takes a global view or perceives the background matrix that produces the figure … it allows one to see or re-configure the linkages in a complex structure … suspending the deconstructive moment of analysis allows a different relation between self and object in which unconscious associations have free play, and primary process is brought to bear on the object" (Froggett 2005, 11 on Ehrenzweig 1967).

The structure of the case

This is something we have tussled with for a long time. We used to talk in terms of deep structure – the underlying thematic field – what is this case really all about? Sometimes we talk about the key or the structural dynamic of the case, or the gestalt of the case. Are these not all the same thing?

There is a de facto assumption here that this will go well beyond the self-perception of the interviewee.

On the other hand we often wonder if the structure of the case is a holy grail which you don't really need for practical purposes, and can't 'finally' attain. Often a decent case summary seems perfectly adequate.

It partly depends whether you want to use a case for single case analysis, or as a particular model in a typology, or whether you are taking one aspect of the case to contribute to a wider picture, as in an agency study.

Of course, at the stage of completing a case study you don't know how you are going to use it theoretically. Choosing your theoretical angle may affect the slant you take in presenting a case, but it ought not to affect the case structure, at least not essentially. A good theoretical angle may well enhance the key features of the case.

We have always said that the structure of the case emerges from comparing the lived and the told story, although in more applied research we often haven't done a separate analysis of the lived life by a BDA.

In the Sostris project we said that in comparing cases we move from craft (with set procedures) to art (thinking with the whole case). But since then we have come to emphasis the role of imagination in arriving at the case structure, again drawing on the notion of a syncretistic process. This suggests the value of holding off arriving at a gestalt – in order to allow a longer gestation process.

We have also come to focus much more on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. The analysis of the interview relationship might focus on a particular interaction in the interview, or on the overall pattern and dynamic of the interview. This might well see interviews as enacting or mirroring processes and relationships in the Centre (Chamberlayne 2005).

An example would be of an oedipal transition being enacted between interviewer and interviewee (Froggett and Wengraf 2004).

We used to argue, following Rosental, that the structure of the case lay in the initial narrative, so that the interpretation focused most intensively on that, whereas now we tend to look for shifting dynamics and changes in emotional tone across the whole interview.

Explain twin track analysis of interviews – OHP and handout

Eg - The doctor at the centre who initially present a PR job 'It's wonderful', and second time round more like 'it's bloody difficult'. He gives glimpses of the difficulties in the first part, but the whole weight changes in the second part. Both are of course true – but it is only in his more reflected second part that he elaborates on his ambivalence. Whether he intends to or whether his ambivalence comes out through the actual stories he finds himself telling is a moot point.

Or Jan, a health visitor, who starts off with a nurses' straitjacket, giving her initial narrative under six enumerated headings. In the second part, having come out with a critical account of a difficult period early in the history of the organisation, she makes

a major psychic shift towards more expressive talk about the excitements and challenges of her work with depressed young mothers.

An interesting question is whether this approach to interpretation of cases would have been more productive in the SOSTRIS and CoC projects. My feeling is that a) it is particularly pertinent for research into professional interventions and b) we wouldn't have had sufficient local knowledge to make such interpretations in another society. But I am probably justifying what I happen to have done!

Reconnecting policy with lived experience

One of the most important uses of biographical methods for me lies in reconnecting social policy with lived experience, and placing biographical resources and biographical strategies centre-stage in professional interventions – as Catherine was arguing yesterday. The Sostris project indicated that this was all the more important in a period of rapid and extremely diversified social change. It bore out that there is a cultural lag between assumptions of social policy and the realities of lives and aspirations, and that biographies are very relevant to policy making, since individuals are brokering and pioneering new situations. Policy findings from Sostris included:

- Single parents and relational problems - x-generational patterns of absent men.
- Illness through stress as a way of cooling out resistance to redundancies and rationalisation. Large amount of self blame among people who get ill – and many do.
- Loss of collective supports in life transitions and yet greater degree of commonality in people's situations than individuals perceive - need for supportive public discourse that recognises the dilemmas of contemporary life.

But case studies can also animate and inspire conceptual thinking. The Sostris book, *Biography and Social Exclusion in Europe* (2002), shows a range of ways of comparing and theorising from case studies. It was written well after the end of the project (and you need time for digestion), without the benefit of cross-national discussion, since we had no more money for meetings. The Murard (2005) chapter, for example, is fascinating at a conceptual level, drawing from a range of cases. It shows how a little in-depth material goes a long way.

Shortcomings at the writing up stage

My difficulty in finding cases to compare for my chapter on second generation immigrants in the Sostris book and for this workshop illustrates a widespread problem. We did compare cases together, as I have described. But at the point of writing up you need to be able to choose specific kinds of cases and to return to the interview transcript, also for more quotes. You cannot just work from even detailed case summaries. But few of the interviews or their working materials are available to you in your language.

To write an article you need to enter a life world – which requires depth and revisiting. You often gain a different inflection in digging deeper and in making a particular theoretical inflection.

Not many of the chapters compare cases from different countries. To do that would have required authors to work in pairs or groups – with coordinated time and travel money. The alternative of translated interview texts and working materials would also be prohibitive.

2. Two stages of interpretation

I have talked about ways of considering the dynamics of a whole interview. But we always kick-start any in-depth interpretation with three hour workshops on at last two aspects. In research on professional interventions this has tended to be thematic field analysis (structure of the told story) and micro analysis (analysis of a salient text segment).

Of course the 'lived life' is not just to be found in the biographical 'events'. We push for particular incident narratives in order to get a close recall and re-experiencing of past events – in contrast with theories and opinions about them from today's perspective. What evidently 'happened' from a story about a critical incident may be rather different from what is suggested by someone's self-theorising of their practice. Aspects of behaviour and practice may also be enacted in the interview, as I have suggested.

For a fuller account of this method see Wengraf 2001, and/or contact Tom Wengraf for the *Short Guide* (2005)

Discussion of handout on Biographical Data Analysis (lived life) and Thematic Field Analysis (told story). The handout is about Djamilla – a case I will present in a minute.

The handout is in two sections. Extracts of raw material are presented, the early chronology of the life, and a summary (sequentialisation) of the initial passages of the interview text.

These are analysed chunk by chunk and future-blind, in an action approach. We are interested in what dynamics of the life are being built up, why the interview account is being constructed in this way. We are reconstructing a reconstruction.

The structural hypotheses (SH's) ate taken from training workshops this week – acknowledgements to the five participants. I have not included the ordinary hypotheses which are listed through a process of free associative brainstorming. SH's derive a little later on from this process. But you can see how, working from the detailed particularities of the life and the story, the SH's document a process of moving towards a grasp of the whole interview, building up insights and ideas that will be confirmed or refuted as the analysis proceeds. You can also see that this process elicits subjective engagement and identification while also calling on contextual and social knowledge.

After the workshops the researcher is on their own. But probably several of the key dynamics will already have been identified. If you are interested in how an interpretation can derive from the shape of an interview try Chamberlayne (2004)

3. Presentation and comparison of cases

Djamillah and Steven presented verbally with the help of diagrams and quotations. They appear with a third case, Zenon, in my chapter from the Sostris book – see Chamberlayne 2002.
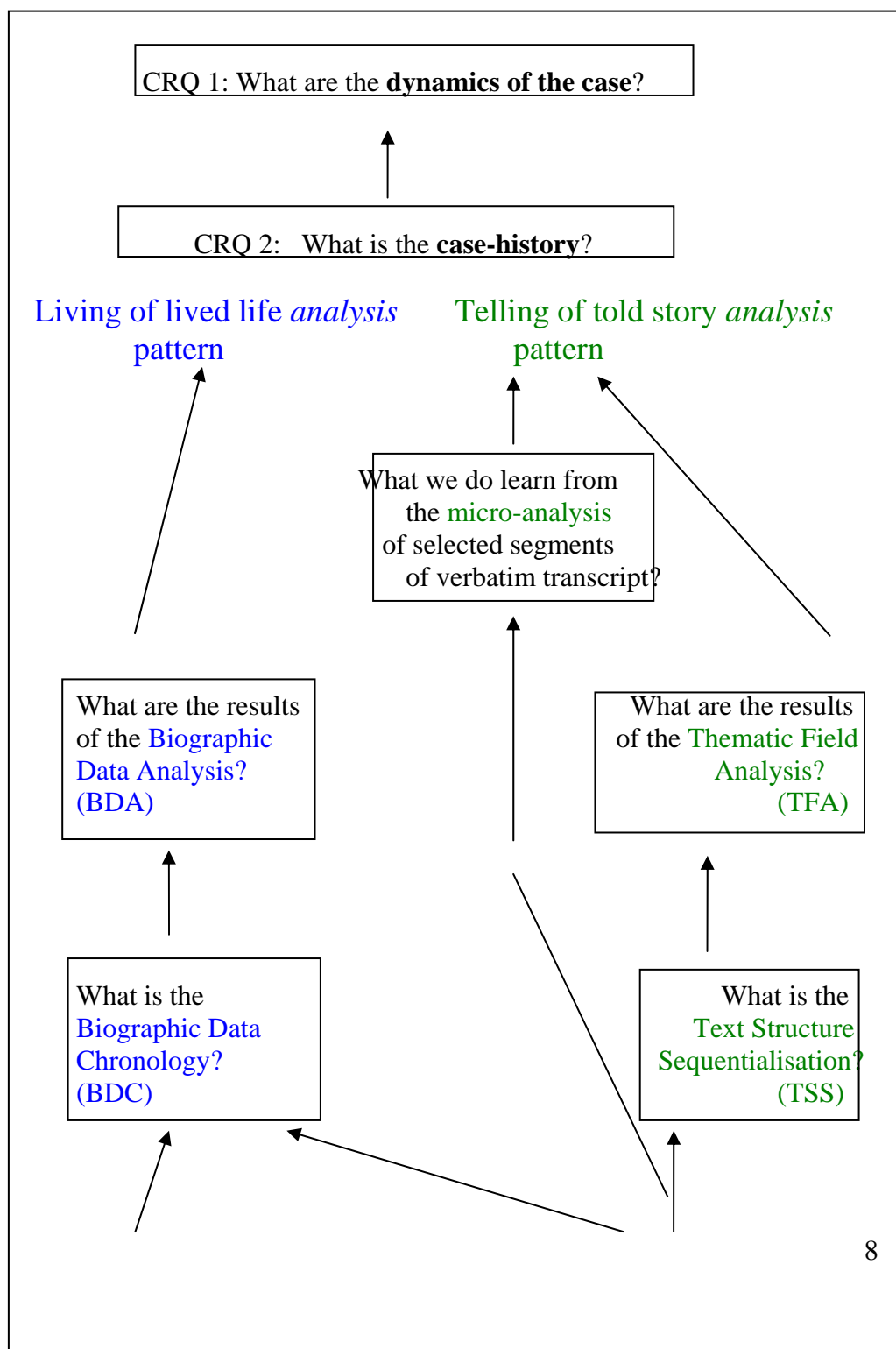
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HANDOUT 1 Analytical Steps in BNIM (see Wengraf 2005, *Short Guide to BNIM)*

CRQ 1: What are the **dynamics of the case**?

CRQ 2:   What is the **case-history**?

Living of lived life *analysis* pattern

Telling of told story *analysis* pattern

What we do learn from the micro-analysis of selected segments of verbatim transcript?

What are the results of the Biographic Data Analysis? (BDA)

What are the results of the Thematic Field Analysis? (TFA)

What is the Biographic Data Chronology? (BDC)

What is the Text Structure Sequentialisation? (TSS)

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│      Outside Data        │          │      The BNIM        │
│     Field-notes +        │          │  Narrative Interview │
│    other interviews      │          │      Material        │
│       documents          │          │   tape + transcript  │
│    social + historical   │          │                      │
│      research etc        │          │                      │
└─────────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
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HANDOUT 2 – Djamilla, sample segments and structural hypotheses

BDC.   Biographical Data (early part) – (lived life)

segment 1
1933   D's father born in Pakistan
          becomes a major
          injured during 1950s
1962   Parents marry
          wife aged 19 and illiterate
          strict Muslims

segment 2
1967   father comes to UK
          joins brother in bakery in St Albans
1968   son born in Pakistan
1969   mother comes
1971   Djamillah born
1973 & 5 brothers born

BDA.   Structural Hypotheses from first two chunks of Biographical Data Analysis – the lived life – (two and a half training workshop)

Segment 1
SH1 Dj's obligations to wider family will restrict her scope for individual choices
SH2 the family will be split between assimilation and difference
SH3 Family bonding against racism will exacerbate external hostility

Segment 2
SH4 likelihood of internal and external conflict and a repressed family dynamic from the intersection of patriarchy, racism, mother's isolation, gender relations, sexuality, and language
SH5 Dj has a strong worked-through identity from negotiating language, mother's and father's defensiveness, own issues of identity, plus racism, gender/cultural issues etc
SH6 Dj will struggle with low esteem from the downward mobility of the family and sense of loss. She may
          6.1 become ambitious, fight back, develop a sense of gain and the capacity to seize opportunities
          6.2 she may acquire learned helplessness and victimhood
SH7 Surrounded by 3 brothers, Dj will be experienced in the masculine and this bodes well for (hetero)sexual relationships

TSS (sequence of interview segments)
Interview segments for workshop on Thematic Field Analysis (told story)

segment 1

1/25   S   *qu* ask you to tell me your life story
              begin where you want
              interested in all things which were important for you
              not interrupting
              taking notes for asking later

segment 2

1/37   D *qu*   start from wherever?
1/39   S *answer* yeah
1/41   D *int rem*   okay
1/43   S *int rem*   yeah
1/45   D *qu*   shall I just start?
1/47   S *answer* yeah

Segment 3

1/49 D *int rem* well okay
          report   born in England
                   parents immigration from Pakistan
                   father in'67, mother in '69
                   3 bro's, born in Engl
                   all professionals
                   'I studied-'

Segment 4

2/18   *report*   Grammar school
        /argu   "it was important for me to get through"
                shock at being one of two black girls at school -
                "it seemed so odd"

Segment 5

2/42   *argu*   tried to behave like white people
                 troubles at home
                 parents strict Muslims
                 we were rebellious: keeping up with our generation

Segment 6

3/3   *report* father forbade mixed College
        /argu   studying was important for her
                first academically educated girl in family

Segment 7

3/12   *narr*   fight about university education
                A-levels, had to move out for university
3/14   *eval*   **"that was another big major fight"**

TFA – structural hypotheses
**Structural Hypotheses from Thematic Field Analysis – the told story -
(two and a half hour training workshop)**

segment 4

SH1 Ambition meets obstacles, especially racism
SH2 Understanding herself as marginal will be an empowering resource
SH3 Leaving the safety net of the family and becoming an (exceptional) individual creates a sense of isolation ands visibility, and tension between her and her family/community

segment 5 - none

segment 6
SH4 Education is the pivot of her identity

segment 7
SH5 Conflict will increase as she asserts herself
SH6 She will have to sacrifice her family for her individual priorities
SH7 Life is a fight and she is a fighter