

LIFE STORY RESEARCH

Reflections on biographical and narrative approaches

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Spontaneous narratives

- **Generated in the course of a semi structured interview**
- **In response to specific decontextualised questions**
- **Participants' 'readiness' to be interviewed prompted by life course transitions**
- **Unpredictable and unexpected**

The conditions for spontaneous narratives

- **Not all take up the challenge**
- **Identifying the markers of the narrative voice**
- **A search for coherence out of incoherence**
- **Interviewer as catalyst and social medium where**
 - interviewee has agreed that story is of interest
 - the interviewer gives interviewee autonomy to present their view of the world

Heroic story Migrant Irish grandfather ESRC Study of Fathers over 3 Generations

- **Variety of ways people respond to life story request**
- **Paradigmatic success story**
- **Connor's story**
 - **Childhood marked by misfortune**
 - **Migrations**
 - **Opportunity to make a mark on world**
 - **'Never looked back'**

How story fits teller's current purposes

- Resistance to life review ; wish for past to stay buried
- Boosts self at expense of others (Coleman 1991 on reminiscence groups)
- Closing down emotions (Craig 2000)
- Self as unchanging (Ricoeur 1985)

Closing down of narrative

Irish migrant grandfather, Connor's life story

- **Hints of a life untold**
- **Clues in initial statement (the past) 'a different life altogether'**
- **Unfolding of small stories along the way (Phoenix 2009)**
- **Adherence to identity as given and unchanging (Ricoeur 1985)**

Research design and approach

- **Case studies of individuals and chains of related men**
- **Comparative approach**
- **Case selection critical**
- **Contextualisation and thick description**
- **Multi layered approach (data integration)**

Biographic-Narrative Interview Method BNIM

- **Initial invitation to tell a life story or story related to a particular theme**
- **Interviewer as listener**
- **Use of narrative questions**
- **Keep the gestalt of the story**
- **Give opportunities for additional narrative**

Methods of analysis

- **After the interview extensive field notes (research context, encounter, key themes)**
- **Create life history chronology**
- **Transcription and extend field notes**
- **Separate in initial analysis history from story**
- **Comparative analysis of histories across groups**
- **Comparative analysis of chains integrating history and story**

Bringing biographical and narrative methods together

- **Develop methodology**
- **Combine biography and autobiography**
- **Situate analyses in time and space**
- **Unfolding stories told in the present**
- **Enhance contextualisation**

Contextualisation

- **Biographic methods focus on wider structural context (macro, meso and micro social)**
- **Narrative methods focus on interview context**
- **Lack of attention to structural contextualisation**
- **Importance of wider context in study of transnational groups**
- **Strengthens understanding of agency**

Bringing biographical and narrative methods together

- Offer new ways of bringing methods and data together
- Globalising world: interest in ‘experiences’ and trend / comparative data
- Offer a return to linked methods of famous cohort studies and mixed methods
- Guard against naïve prioritising of ‘voice’
- Make sociological imagination paramount

Bringing biographical and narrative methods together

Interplay between way people talk about experiences and structures

Art of re-presentation

Science of systematic analysis

No one method of doing this