

Life Story Research: Some reflections on narrative

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Spontaneous narratives

I want to begin with a few observations about how I came to be more aware of the form in people respond to our questions as empirical qualitative researchers.

I did not start out as many researchers do today to seek personal narratives, testimonies and memories. Such research aims have since come to the fore in a climate of emancipatory politics. My early interest in narrative or story telling was sparked by people telling me stories spontaneously about their lives, in the course of semi-structured interviews.

Let me give you an example. In the very early 1980s I was doing a great deal of fieldwork for a large study based on a community sample of working class mothers in a particular area of London. It aimed to explain the social origins of depression and involved in depth interviews. As part of what was a four hour interview we were required to begin the interview with a lengthy psychiatric research instrument (the Present State Examination or PSE) in which the interviewees were asked if, when, and over which particular periods and how often they had experienced a vast range of imaginable and unimaginable psychiatric symptoms. Although the study was about the aetiology of psychiatric illness the methods had no interest in women's own understandings of their conditions. The interviews were never fully transcribed and women's stories were lost. What struck me and has stayed with me some thirty years on was how decontextualised, unaskable questions in some cases provoked stories about people's lives and did indeed provide insight into mental illness.

Sadly I have forgotten much of the detail of the women's stories. In one case my memory was overlaid by the shock I experienced at my first interview using the PSE when I asked what seemed to me then an unaskable question 'Do you ever feel like you are falling off the edge of the universe?' This question provoked a young mother to describe her feelings and give a story about her life at that time. My memory of that story was wiped out. What remained was the concern I felt at the time about her small child who was busy destroying the sound system in the sitting room, an activity which his mother, so engrossed was she in telling her story was only occasionally distracted by.

Another interview figures in my memory of a mother who described her anxiety symptoms as being brought on by her job as a cleaner for London Underground; she vividly recalled what it was like to go into the tunnels in the early hours when the tube system had closed down and to clean out the rubbish among the rats and in the darkness. Another mother talked about her fear of heights and confined space and how that meant she was unable to attend her interviews at the welfare benefit office which was on the top floor of a local tower block. Her fear of heights also made her very fearful for her children's safety in public places and so inhibited their freedom. These and many other stories emerged often early on in what were often very long interviews and in response to quite specific questions. Since then I have also wondered whether my way of selling the study to the women was important in shaping their responses. Contrary to instructions of the Director of the project I used to tell women that we wanted to hear what it was like to live through the early 1980s – Thatcher's Britain.

I also began to notice that not only did people decide when and how in the interviews they chose to tell their stories, they might also choose the timing of the interview itself. One instance stands out very clearly in my mind. After a number of phone calls about setting a date convenient for the interviewee, a time and day were arranged. The interviewee greeted me accordingly on the agreed date as if suggesting this was now a propitious moment to be interviewed. I cannot recall

the order in which she gave these explanations but it went something like this, 'I have bought a dog, dyed my hair and got rid of my husband'. Clearly the readiness of this woman to take part in the study at this particular time was prompted by a life course transition.

When I moved to a new study interviewing women with a more varied social class profile, I encountered such experiences less often. But I began to realise how unpredictable storytelling was.

The conditions of spontaneous narrative

As those analysing qualitative research and narrative form emphasise the interview is a collaborative venture. What Martine Burgos (1988 and unpublished) terms 'the inaugural request' by the interviewer to tell a life story not only beckons the interviewee into the narrative mode it also legitimates it. As noted in my early research career when I was doing conventional semi structured interviews I noticed that there were occasions when people broke the rules of the 'question and answer' format of the qualitative interview. Somewhat contrary to Denzin (1997) who suggested that as interpretive researchers we *seek out* the stories people tell one another 'as they attempt to make sense of the epiphanies or existential turning point moment in their lives (p92), I seemed to happen upon them. Story telling was prefaced by the interviewee deciding to adopt the narrative turn. Burgos notes the obverse of my experience, namely that when she sought to elicit a life story explicitly from her informants only a few of them took up the challenge. Her informants did not necessarily produce narratives defined in terms of a unifying or coherent story though they answered her questions. This does not mean, as she says, that these people lacked narrative competence.

Burgos goes on to enunciate what the literature has deemed some of the markers that go with speaking in a narrative voice; their storied structure; the use of 'direct quotation of speech as if the characters of the past presented themselves on

a stage; ‘the production of closed significant anecdotes... considered as linguistic and narrative marks of the process of fictionalisation’. Other markers include the dramatic character of the performance that is conducted for an audience with attention to aesthetics and emotions (Denzin 1997 96). As the literature on narrative suggests, narrators do not discover the rules of narrative for themselves but follow some kind of model suited to their aims, albeit they are rarely likely to be aware of the narrative frames they are using.

From Martine Burgos’ point of view the provocation to engage with telling a life story with all the markers of a narrative is the experience of rupture or turning point. As she wrote and talked about in the 1980s, following Paul Ricoeur (1985), the narrator seeks to make a coherent entity out of heterogeneous and often conflicting ideological positions, experiences, feelings, and events which create some kind of disjunction in the life. In that sense the narrator is seeking to ‘transcend’ the rupture and to make sense of it. Quoting Ricoeur (1985), Burgos says that the event or rupture while doubtless real has to be interpreted in terms of the relational self – the self in relation to others.

Burgos’ theory made a great deal of sense to me in my experience of spontaneous narratives. But how does this square with the view that all interviews are collaborative endeavours? Rather I concur with Burgos that in such cases the interviewer while acting as the initiator also acts as a social medium or catalyst, that is given two conditions; first, that the interviewee has agreed that her life is of interest for a potential audience; and second, that the interviewer has given the interviewee some autonomy to ‘impose their own problematic or way of viewing the world.’ While we should be self analytical in interpreting data, we should not lose sight of the conditions in which interviews create them.

Responding to the narrative invitation

In asking people to talk freely about their lives, I have found a variety of ways in which people respond. Autobiographies of migrants are often those that position

selves as heroes in their own stories; some recounted success stories having struggled against the odds. Such narratives constitute resources which set up a moral worldview and warrant the person's positions in it. They are therefore normative.

Our study of 'Fatherhood across three generations in Polish, Irish and white British families,' suggests a variety of ways of engaging with the narrative mode. Connor's story is an emblematic heroic story about surviving an unhappy Irish childhood. He uses the emplotment of time to tell a dramatic story. He sets the scene for a number of denouements; the story begins with a series of misfortunes which he seeks from a current vantage point to minimise and to put behind him. His trajectory takes a new turn after his second migration to the UK. He grasps the opportunity with both hands and acts upon it.

'And the dad (his dad) went to America and then came back from America ... – he was a plasterer. And then uh, what happened, they must have had me then like you know, cos I was the seventh son. ... I'm the last of them by the way. But anyway, father and mother died when I was only 2, 2 and a half – there's about 10 months between the two of them. And the mother said like you know 'I won't be dead a year, and he'll be behind me' like you know. Which he was. .. Well anyway that was how, the way (pause) I didn't know them like you know what I mean, so I don't (pause) in fairness to everybody else like – I didn't miss my mum and dad because I didn't know them. So how can you miss your mum and dad, you know. .. After the father and mother died they took me away and put me into a hospital because they had to examine me and all that so that I hadn't got the TB, you know tuberculosis... It was rampant in those years, the 1930s, in the '30s you know – it was rampant it was. There were so many dying of TB them years you know. Anyway I didn't have it. But you know when you're a baby everybody likes to pick you up, don't they? ...Well I'm getting to the story, but everybody likes to pick you up. Well I

didn't know this till years and years and years after – that what happened to me was (pause) one of the nurses picked me up and let me fall... Yeah, let me fall and broke my back.'

Connor then spends a number of years in hospital and a convalescent home before being sent to an Industrial School run by the Christian Brothers which trained him for a trade once he reached his teens. He stresses he was not subject to any sexual abuse. The 'break' in his life in terms of it taking an upward turn comes when after his second migration to London he is offered the chance to be a foreman for a large building firm. The company car symbolises or stands for the sense of pride and status.

'So I said (pause) well that was a big job for me and it meant I could get a company car then you see. (Oh) I said 'This is great' ... it was a big company like. Gs was the name of them..., and then I went from them to a proper really big crowd, you know – it was in the '50s. And then I said to (wife), I said 'You can have a go at this now' I said 'with this car' I said – it was only an Escort you know. Because when you're higher than a general foreman you get a bigger car... So of course naturally, what did I do? – I got higher. So I run the job then like you know, I was just sitting behind a desk and everybody would come in 'Could I see Mr ...' you know whoever it is, and I felt (pause) I felt great'....But anyway, I never looked back, I really never looked back from then on. I carried on and carried on.'

What is important in determining whether interviewees engage with the narrative mode at the time of interview are the current purposes of telling their story *for the tellers*. Coleman (1991) studied reminiscence groups run with the elderly in institutional settings. He argues that the current context of telling and the way it intersects with the experiences of people's lives are important (Coleman 1991). Cultural conceptions of old age swing between Aristotle's observation that the

old 'live by memory rather than by hope' and Cicero's panegyric 'De Senectute' – the serenity, reflection and wisdom of old age. Both conceptions characterise the debate about the position of the elderly in society and also the meaning of reminiscence work. Coleman found that, contrary to the therapeutic aims behind reminiscence as a process of life review, some elderly people resisted the review process, while others used reminiscence groups to boost their egos (through story telling) at others' expense.

Along somewhat similar lines, and reminiscent of Hochschild's *The Managed Heart*, Craig (2000) suggests narratives can enact stereotypical emotions as ways of avoiding the experiencing of emotions. In that sense there is a distorted process of meaning making.

Rejecting the narrative mode

Some potential narrators reject the narrative mode altogether only barely hinting at a life untold. An example is an Irish grandfather. Eamon, an 84 year old frail grandfather migrated at the age of 19 and worked in construction most of his life in the UK. He was in very poor health at interview and has since died. He gave no initial narrative. In response to the question, *Can you just tell me the story of your life? You can start where you want*), all he said was 'A very different life altogether'. Ann Mooney who interviewed him wrote in her field notes as follows;

'He was very quietly spoken and it was difficult to understand him at times. Given ... the fact that he found it impossible to respond to the SQUIN, I decided that the best thing was to converse with him... I therefore spoke much more than I usually would and tended to raise my voice though I don't think he had a hearing problem! There was also a lot of repetition of what he said so that I could confirm I had got it right... His answers were very brief to start with, but as he relaxed he began to expand on his answers.'

Some of his life story unfolded as he recounted ‘small stories’ (Phoenix 2009) along the way. For example, in response to a series of questions he gives some clues about life when he was a child in Ireland but it is not a narrative.

I: Uhuh. (pause 7) um (pause) and did your dad work long hours, was it hard work?

R: It was (inaudible) (Uhuh, uhuh) that time there there was no work, only on the farm (Yeah yeah) and there was no money. 9 shillings a week you used to get, dole money. (?) To feed seven of us.

I: Yeah yeah. I’ve spoken to some grandfathers about your age who have come over (pause) who came over to Ireland (?) and they didn’t have electricity in the farm or -

R: No such thing. (No) No such thing as a tap in the house. (Yeah) All they had was turf for the fire. Everything was cooked on the fire.

I: Everything was cooked on the fire was it? Uhuh.

R: A turf fire. (?)

I: Was it cold in the bedrooms when -

R: It certainly was (inaudible)

I: Yeah yeah.

R: They were all thatched roofs. Mostly all (?)

I: Thatched roofs, yes. And because your dad was working a lot, did he have other jobs or just on the farm?

R: Just on the farm.

I: Yeah yeah. Did that mean that you didn’t see him much? Or were you able to see a bit of him?

R: I was only there until I was 14, going to school. (Yeah) After that I was gone away, working for the postman.

I: Yeah you worked on this other farm then and you had to leave home.

R: I had to leave home.

As Ricoeur (1985) suggests in his discussion of identity as a process of ‘emplotment’, there is a tension between the self experienced as continuity – often described in terms of attributes which remain the same over time and the self as experienced as discontinuous or changing - how we see ourselves as we once were and how we will become. Like the other first generation Irish men in our study, Eamon answered the question about his ethnic identification in terms of the county where he was born or grew up. Asked what it means to be Irish he also suggests an ascribed status, ‘*it’s just that I’m Irish and that’s it. But I’m here so long now.*’ His answer was definitive; his identity is given and is not something he has struggled to hang on to. Nothing more is said. The sad music of the remark ‘I’m here so long now’ led me to wonder if Eamon was thinking back to something he mentioned earlier about having once wanted to return to Ireland (with which his wife did not concur). But he tells us nothing more.

Life story studies: Research design and approach

In two ESRC funded studies we adopted the Biographic-Interpretive Narrative Interviewing method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001); a study of Four generation families (Brannen Mooney and Moss 2004); and the study already mentioned Fatherhood across three generations in Polish, Irish and white British families (Brannen et al in press).

In terms of the research design for both of these intergenerational studies, we applied a case study approach (Gomm et al 2000). We worked at the level of the *individual case*, but we also worked at the level of the chains of related family members. In the Four Generations study we interviewed up to eight family members in 12 family chains from great grandparents to parents; in some of the analysis we focused on the whole chains, in others on gendered chains for example great grandmother, grandmother and mother. In the study ‘Fatherhood across three generations in Polish, Irish and white British families’ we interviewed grandfathers, fathers and sons from three groups of Irish, Polish and

white British and sought to work at the level of the relationship of fathers and sons.

This case-based approach was also *comparative* which allowed us to draw theoretical inferences, that is to extrapolate the features of a case theoretically to a set of conditions. It could also involve empirical generalisation, for example, from one case to other cases. While this knowledge was sought at the case level, each story, or case, added nuance to understanding the collectivity (Bertaux, 1997; Bertaux & Thompson, 1997). Sampling or selection of cases therefore was a critical aspect of our methodological practice (Wigfall et al in press).

In case studies it is necessary to assemble a great deal of data about the cases. It is necessary to understand the populations they are drawn from and the contexts in which they are situated. This is important for demonstrating typicality but also for understanding the case *per se*. Hence one of the methodological principles of case study approaches is *contextualisation*. Contextualisation is about filling in the background to what people say and how they define their experiences.

This typically means working with different layers of context – macro, meso and micro (Brannen and Nilsen 2011). When one is working with transnational groups as in the case of Polish migrants, contextualisation at different levels becomes very important in situating the cases. Geertz' notion of thick description developed in cultural anthropology is useful here and relevant to case study data but especially transnational or cross national research (Geertz 1973).

Working with data at the intergenerational family level, in which different informants' perspectives in a family are brought to bear, involves methodological strategies akin to those advocated in the mixed methods literature. The process resembles what is often referred to as triangulation or data integration or data meshing; looking at how different perspectives corroborate, complement and conflict, the latter raising new questions for the analysis (Brannen 2004).

Biographic-narrative interviewing method (BNIM)

Briefly this is how BNIM interview method that we used worked. The adult research participants were invited to recount their lives usually in relation to a particular aspect with a minimum of guidance and intervention from the interviewer. The interviewer was required only to ask narrative questions. This required considerable retraining. For me this was a refreshing departure in my career as a qualitative researcher; it re-socialised me from asking millions of questions and probes into a way of seeking more story and listening to the unfolding storylines .

The requirement of the BNIM method of interviewing is for the researcher to listen and so to give the research participant an opportunity to present their own *gestalt*. It is usual to give the interviewee three opportunities to ‘add something more’. In the second part of the interview, the interviewer invites the interviewee to elaborate on salient events and experiences that figured in their initial narrative, in the order of telling. In the two studies, we began the interview with this approach but adapted the method to include a third part of the interview (that took place in some cases at a second sitting). Here we asked questions relating to the specific foci of the study if they had not already been covered in sufficient detail. Following the interview we wrote extensive field notes about the research context, the interview encounter and the main themes covered. The summary was further extended after the interview came back from being professionally transcribed. The summaries were often around 10-14 single-spaced A4 pages.

We did not follow the BNIM method of analysis for resource reasons; in part because we had such large data sets and tight time lines. In the second study we also had heterogeneous data sets – chains from three ethnic groups. The first phase of analysis of our material involved an intensive analysis of the field notes/ interview summaries and the transcripts. The individual’s interpretive accounts relating to the main themes of the study were analysed under a number of headings; migration, growing up, employment career, being a father,

transmission, and new themes not anticipated in the design. The individual's life history – life course events, phases, timings - were identified and sequentially ordered. We looked at how different trajectories intersected and identified potential turning points. For example, we looked at the timing of migration in the life course and its relation to the transition to adulthood in terms of leaving home and becoming economically independent; the work and housing migrants found on arrival in Britain; the relation of this to the transition to fatherhood and subsequent life events and experiences. We examined the life histories across each of the ethnic groups and compared the groups.

A crucial aspect of the analysis was the initial separation of the life history/ life course trajectory from the interpretive narratives. This strategy was adopted to focus attention on the shape and content of biographies irrespective of how individuals interpreted them. It thus enabled the analyst to be open to other life course directions the informant might have followed and choices s/ he might have made. The rationale for this is to increase the explanatory potential of the study by ruling out competing hypotheses and explanations both for the individual's life trajectory and the agency of the individual in directing it. This is done through setting up a panel the members of which engage in a close sequential analysis both of the life course sequence and 'facts' of the person's life and the unfolding textual account of the 'life story'. Counter hypothesising is crucial for enabling the researcher to move beyond their own intuition and common sense and thereby expand the sociological imagination (Wengraf 2001 p258). Our resources did not permit us do this. Instead we brought together the life history data with the interpretive accounts, focusing on the chains of each ethnic group, with a different team member taking a different ethnic group to start with. In the last phase we sought to match cases across the groups and thus engaged in comparative analysis of the chains.

Reflections on a bringing together biographical and narrative methods

In the 1990s, questions of ontology and epistemology have dominated the literature on narrative and biographical methods leading to a major divide between the two traditions (Nilsen and Brannen 2010). Interestingly debates about methodology have been less prominent. Methodological discussion, for example about how many cases are sufficient for the sample and for analysis, are however beginning to come to the fore (see recent discussion for the BNIM on line forum). Bridging the polarisation that has gone on between the two approaches is likely to promote methodological development.

I want to end by looking at what I see as some convergences between the biographic and the narrative approaches and suggest some of the advantages of bringing them together.

First, a biographic-interpretive approach in social science is like *combining biography with autobiography*. Biography is also like doing research (Oakley 2010). Biographers resemble forensic pathologists; according to Hermione Lee (2009) they carry out autopsies, leaving no bone undisturbed. The biographer is also a detective: they search after facts adhering to a realist approach ontologically speaking; they aim to cover the whole life or at least everything considered relevant; they identify all their sources; and they act as historians in linking their subjects (sic) to the age in which their 'subjects' lived. Autobiographies focus more on subjectivity; they focus on the story of the self, on mean-making processes; and on performativity in relation to an audience. But the approaches also converge. For example, the biographer is also concerned to represent the self, and engages with their own reflexivity about the subject and often themselves. But perhaps most importantly as Denzin (1989) notes, biographies and autobiographies are both 'conventionalised narrative expressions of life experiences'. Memory is always enacted in accordance with structured conventions of narrative and performative genres.

Second, together the approaches provide sociological explications that are situated in *time and space* (Abbott 1997). Together they offer a holistic and processual picture through the concept of the life trajectory and the hermeneutic aspects of the life. Life histories are embedded in ‘interpretative understandings of biographically unfolding subjectivity’ (Atkinson 2009). Such an approach incorporates what Molly Andrews et al term ‘event-centred’ and ‘experience-centred’ narrative analysis (Andrews et al., 2009). The two *have* to be brought together because events are recounted as memories. As Antze (1996) observes, memories are monuments that we visit but they are also ‘ruins’ which ‘we subject to restoration’.

Third, both are dynamic unfolding stories about the past into which the actors situate insert themselves *in the present*. They are ‘generated retrospective accounts of decisions, actions and events, often in distant periods of the life course, and in the contexts of particular situations, relationships and moral judgments pertaining to these. Not only may recall falter, but the evaluations of those decisions and events are made with reference to *present* time frames, even though informants seek to recall the past and how they thought and felt then. It is, in practice, impossible for the raconteur to stand outside the present when considering the past.’ (Brannen et al., 2004:84). In addition, as much of the literature on narrative approaches suggests, accounts are inevitably incomplete and partial. Moreover they are shaped by the researcher’s interests and by interviewees’ taking these into account and by the research encounter itself.

Narratives are dramatic performances; interviewees may reenact the past as if they were there. They may employ dramatic techniques of metaphor and metonymy to convey meaning. This is not to suggest that narrative speech is pure; interviewees typically intersperse narrative with argumentation and evaluation situated in present time. The selections that people make from their lives are often telling but so too the choices that researchers make in selecting a particular case or life course phase for the analysis. As Rosenthal says ‘it is by no

means coincidental or insignificant when biographers argue about one phase of their lives but narrate another at great length, and then give only a brief report of yet another part of their lives...'(1998; 4-5).

Fourth, both biographic and narrative approaches require *contextualization*; in the former filling in the wider context and in the latter the interview context. In doing so, they shed light on *the relation* between agency and structure. Methodological texts these days give surprisingly little attention to the former compared with the latter. It seems to be taken as given among some sociologists that the wider context speaks for itself and that only when working across different countries is contextualisation seen as deserving special attention (Hantrais 1999).

Contextualisation is a part of analysis that is often either left out or bracketed off in a separate chapter of a book or thesis and is not always brought to bear in the analysis of primary data. Particularly in cross cultural or studies involving migrant populations, knowledge about local labour markets and cultures in the originating country and the country of arrival is relevant; also knowledge of institutional systems which shape normative educational trajectories; and macro level structures concerning politics, economics and historical change. As a supervisor and journal editor/ reviewer I often encounter significant omissions of context including by qualitative researchers. Sometimes in the writing up of qualitative data in thematic ways, fundamental sociological characteristics as age, gender, race and social class and thus the way these intersect are not given. Or the historical and social context is taken for granted when to the eyes of a stranger these are crucial to take into account in understanding the phenomenon under study (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002).

Only the other day I came across an example. Two reviewers of an article asked the author whose study concerned a migrant group for more contextualisation. This they declined to do accordingly; in response to the reviewer comments they wrote 'our in depth interviews were guided by the (respondents') constructions of the various aspects of (their life under study) and X came up not as an

overarching theme'. He or she then went on to suggest it would be 'speculative' to comment on differences in structural differences between the countries. I found it interesting that the author gave as the justification for not doing this the narrative approach; 'the narrators define who they are and their connections to social relations and contexts.' One reviewer (not me) argued that this absence of contextual material undermined the purpose of the analysis; indeed noting that a 'greater focus upon structural and institutional arrangements would strengthen (rather than weaken) the understanding of the agency' of this group of migrants. As Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1997) suggest in their discussion of the agency-structure dilemma, the deployment of a resource (whether or not it is given emphasis by an actor) can be key to understanding agency '... *the idea that a life trajectory may be determined – or rather, conditioned – much more easily by the supplying of a resource than by the imposition of a constraint lends an entirely new content to the concept of determination: one which includes both the socio-structural dimension and praxis*' (p95).

Fifth, narrative and biographical methods combined suggest *new ways of bringing methods and data together*. In any case in a rapidly changing and globalising world the demand to understand across time and space how lives are actively structured and narrated by actors will grow alongside a demand for trend data and comparative analysis at global, national and regional levels. Biographical studies in the past have placed emphasis to different degrees upon *the use of more than one method and data source*, with some very notable examples of this by Glen Elder and the Gluecks (Nilsen and Brannen 2010). However the researchers who used a mix of methods (large cohort surveys with in depth interviews with a variety of informants) have rarely been explicit about data integration (ibid.). In such cases we have only recently begun to consider how different methods, especially in linking British cohort studies to qualitative samples (Elliott 2010; Thompson 2005).

Sixth, the two approaches used together guard against naïve exponents of narrative approaches, in particular the prioritising of ‘voice’. I would therefore agree with Paul Atkinson (2009) that it is necessary to move beyond informant testimony and the idea of bearing witness to what actually happened as a *simplistic* reflection of lived experience. We need to problematise the Romantic notion of narrative. Just as, in a parallel way, we need to see quantitative data as products of the methods used and questions. As Hammersley (1989) argues, the research participants are not necessarily best placed in all cases to define or even adequately know fully the context in which they live. It is necessary to leave space for the researcher to produce a sociological narrative, or to engage in what Giddens terms the ‘double hermeneutic’.

In conclusion, together a narrative approach and a contextual / biographical approach suggest the complex interplay between the way people speak about their experiences and the structures against which such talk needs to be understood (McCleod and Thomson, 2009). This requires both the art of analysis and representation and scientific methods; it requires bringing together the critical elements of a life in a convincing and rigorous way to make an argument or to offer an explanation; to develop ‘disciplined systematic analyses of how biographies are produced, shared and transmitted’. This is a difficult feat as Bertaux observes, ‘It takes some training to hear, behind the solo of a human voice, the music of society and culture in the background’ (Bertaux 1990, pp. 167-168). As those writing about the genre of literary biography recognise, there is no one method of doing this (Lee 2009 18).

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