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THE LIFE HISTORY APPROACH: FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE (Pendekatan sejarah hidup: Pengalaman di lapangan)

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ABSTRACT

Life history approach in qualitative research emphasises on the importance of presenting the individual's subjective evaluation of his experiences and of giving information about his social experiences. It is the account of a life, completed or ongoing. This approach combines both written and oral evidence. The information gathered offer basic evidence about social interaction and process. There are many problems involved in the use of life history approach such as reliability, validity and interpretation of information. However, it has certain advantages for studies of social change, as documentation on roles, demonstration of socialisation, and as a mean towards understanding variation within a society. At one time special attention was given to the use of life history approach but not much recording and analysis had been done. Perhaps because researchers have not been very clear about what to do with a life history narrative. The researchers' effect upon the research process and the analysis seems to be a concern in contemporary qualitative research. The same is also true about the individuals, their attitudes and understanding about the subject matter. This article attempts to highlight these key issues. The focus of discussion are on the attitudes of the researchers and his/her roles as a communicator in conducting research. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to discuss the conceptual aspect of life history approach and to identify the strategies used by researchers to effectively communicate with the individual in the process of collecting information.

Keywords: life history, listener, talker, social skill, persuasion skill

ABSTRAK

Pendekatan sejarah hidup dalam penyelidikan kualitatif memberi penekanan kepada pentingnya penilaian subjektif individu tentang pengalamannya dan memberi maklumat tentang apa yang telah dilalui. Pendekatan ini menggabungkan kedua-dua bukti berbentuk lisan dan bertulis. Maklumat yang dikumpul memberi bukti asas mengenai proses dan interaksi sosial. Terdapat beberapa masalah yang melibatkan pendekatan sejarah hidup seperti kebolehpercayaan, kesahan dan pentafsiran maklumat. Bagaimanapun, pendekatan ini berguna bagi kajian perubahan sosial sebagai salah satu kaedah untuk memahami variasi dalam sebuah masyarakat. Mengikut Pada satu ketika, perhatian khusus diberikan terhadap penggunaan pendekatan sejarah hidup tetapi tidak banyak catatan dan analisis dilakukan. Ini berkemungkinan penyelidik tidak begitu jelas tentang apa yang harus dilakukan dengan naratif sejarah hidup. Pada masa kini, kesan penyelidikan ke atas proses penyelidikan dan analisis menjadi kebimbangan dalam penyelidikan kualitatif. Perkara yang sama juga benar mengenai individu, sikap dan pemahaman mereka tentang perkara yang berkaitan. Artikel ini cuba untuk menengahkan isu-isu yang berkaitan. Fokus perbincangan adalah kepada sikap penyelidik dan peranan mereka sebagai penghubung dalam menjalankan penyelidikan. Oleh yang demikian, objektif artikel ini adalah untuk membincangkan konsep pendekatan sejarah hidup dan mengenalpasti strategi yang digunakan oleh penyelidik bagi berhubung secara berkesan dengan individu dalam proses pengumpulan maklumat.

Kata kunci: sejarah hidup, pendengar, orang yang suka bercakap, kemahiran sosial, kemahiran memujuk

INTRODUCTION

Research can be described as a systematic and organized effort to investigate a specific problem that needs a solution or answer to it. Research provides the needed information that guides researchers to make informed decisions to successfully deal with the problems. The information provided could be the result of a careful analysis of data gathered firsthand or of data that are already available. According to Sekaran (2003), research is undertaken for two different purposes. One is to solve a current problem faced and demand a timely solution. The other is to generate a body of knowledge by trying to understand how certain problems that occur can be best understood.

Data collected can be quantitative, as generally gathered through structured questions and creates statistically valid information. Experiments and surveys are the most common quantitative techniques. An experiment tests cause-and-effect relationships in which the researcher randomly assign subjects to groups. Surveys include cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires or structured interviews for data collection with the intent of generalizing from the sample to a population. Qualitative research is generated from the broad answers to specific questions in interviews, or from responses to open-ended questions in a questionnaire, or through observation, or from already available information gathered from various sources. Qualitative research provides definitive information regarding the opinions and behaviors of the subjects in the study. Ethnographies, case studies, personal interviews, focus groups and life history are the most common qualitative research techniques. For ethnography, the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting during a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily, observational data. In case studies, the researcher explores a single entity or phenomenon bounded by time and activity. Personal interviews are conducted on a one-on-one basis, uses an unstructured survey, with open-ended questions, extensive probing questions, usually recorded on tape, and interview typically lasts more than one hour. Focus group is usually led by a moderator, groups of 8-12 people, and meetings last from 1-2 hours. Life history approach emphasises the experiences of the individual that is how the person copes with society. Qualitative research can also be classified as interpretative research. The idea of qualitative research is to purposely select informants that will best answer the research question.

There are three requirements to be taken into consideration when doing research, that is, the researcher, informants, and the tools/ instruments used. A good qualitative researcher is someone who listens, thinks and then asks probing questions to get to the next level of the conversation. The researcher must be expected to feel very personally involved in every step of the research process because every consideration and decision will have to be based on entirely personal grounds. Usually in qualitative research, the researcher is dependent on a few informants revealing a lot of personal information in order to get around the research question and in the end to be able to answer it. The results of both coding and data analysis depends exclusively upon the researcher's interpretation of meanings hidden in data. Therefore, when analysing an interview transcript, the researcher should be able to do the 'translation' accurately.

Zelditch (in Burgess 1982) refers to the informants as:

- i. a surrogate census-taker, a person that have the information which the researcher requires,

- ii. a 'representative respondent' who reports about himself, perhaps deeper and more detailed,
- iii. Reporter who report events which are not directly observed by the researcher.

The tools qualitative research uses are usually personal interview and focus group. The aim is to draw out the important clues that explain behaviour and attitudes by developing a discussion that is getting informants to talk in their own words, how they see a particular idea or issue. The researcher has to be aware of his or her role in the discussion. The researcher must be sharp enough to probe beneath the surface of the issue being raised and be able to challenge the contradictions.

In this article, life history approach has been selected as a research design. Life history is something of a personal narrative in its own right. It explores questions such as, how best to handle the material collected, and how to present it fairly. These are some of the problems, both practical and ethical that we have grappled with. Our solutions have been compromises, at best, by the material and by our individual experience. Nevertheless, we offer them here in the hope that they may help clarify these problems for others working in similar ways. The purpose of this article is to discuss the appropriateness of life history approach in research. The first part of the paper is to discuss the conceptual aspect of life history approach. The second part explains about the study that takes place. The final part reflects on the usefulness of the life history approach and identifying the strategies used by researchers to effectively communicate with the informants in the process of collecting information.

WHAT IS LIFE HISTORY APPROACH?

Life history approach was pioneered by anthropologists and later taken up by sociologists. The sociologists of the Chicago School in the 1930s pioneered this approach. This approach was famous with the study of Polish peasants by Thomas and Znaniecki in 1918, titled *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Thomas and Znaniecki used life histories as well as other materials to trace the life-experiences of Polish countrymen as they came to be involved in the major social changes when they moved from their secured native villages to urban slums in the United States (Park & Burgess 2003). *Polish Peasant* was re-evaluated by Herbert Blumer and Samuel Stouffer, who came to the conclusion that using other techniques such as directed questionnaires and attitude scaling were more efficient and reliable and that life history could be regarded as inefficient and old fashioned. However, it took a long time before this view changed. It was slowly understood that, although questionnaires and scales and multivariate methods were very efficient, they also lost lots of information in the process and that the basic information was not always reliable. So they did not answer very well to questions related to understanding and explaining human experiences. Also the question related to a longer time frame cannot be answered very well even with the help of ordinary survey research.

Another classic example of a life history case study is Clifford Shaw's *The Jack-Roller*. Based on intensive interviews with a young man who made his living by robbing jack-rollers, Shaw explained the process clearly by which the happenings related to this individual in conventional society became increasingly unstable and disorganized as he drifted into his unconventional way of life on the street. Thomas used life history approach to study 'the young prostitutes whose numbers increased so rapidly during World War 1'. According to Driessen (1998), in the early 1980s it was claimed that life history approach were out of fashion. However, in the 1990s, this approach has been popular. More recently, the life history approach has been practiced in a range of disciplines including clinical psychology,

economics, education, geography, anthropology, linguistics, psychology and sociology. However, there are various ways in which data has been collected, analysed and presented whilst using this approach in the respective fields.

A life history is essentially telling or recounting of a string of events. The life history approach which works with personal narratives is 'the unfolding history of one person's experiences'. Life history approach takes into consideration the realist and the constructionist approaches (Encyclopedia for life writing: three articles). The realist approach has been interested in historical processes such as social mobility, generations, and the experiences of social classes and professions. The constructionist approach tends to focus on the presentations of ideas, identities and narrative configurations. An individual's life history becomes an 'entry point' into understanding the social and economic structures which shape the individual's life.

There are many reasons that make the life history approach so fascinating. First, we believe that many of our actions begin in our own life histories and previous experiences. Also, we believe that we have many implicit values and beliefs that guide our thinking and everyday action. Life history approach can be seen to have both general and specific purposes. The general purpose is to provide insights into the nature and meaning of individual or mutually related lives. The specific purpose is to analyse a particular life or lives for some specific reason. A life history begins with a life story related by someone, but will build on the information provided. Other information will also be used such as historical data. In life history approach, large samples are unnecessary and maybe even inappropriate. Adequacy is dependent not upon quantity but upon the richness of the data and the nature of the aspect of life being investigated. This approach provides insight into the lived realities of specific lives. The usage of a wide range of data allows to develop several mode of analysis. In this way, life stories of individuals are integrated into a broader social history.

The life history approach has underlined the importance of listening to the voices of the subject being studied, especially subjects who belong to marginal groups. Life history approach aims to penetrate deeper than any other approaches by allowing the subjects to tell their stories and present their views. Generally speaking, it can be said that life history approach explores the subject's experience and the meanings he/she attributes to the experiences. Apart from voice, the idea of marginality is also important in our research. The process of collecting information is typically to start with a broad overview then to narrow down to the area of interest. A discussion guide is prepared to ensure all the important points are covered and to ensure that spontaneous opinion can be gathered.

Kluckhohn (in Burgess 1982) recognised the many problems involved in the use of life history approach such as reliability, validity and interpretation of information. Reliability refers to the consistency of findings or results, whereas validity questions arise if the study in fact investigates what was intended. The problem of reliability of life history evidence can be approached in two ways. First, by checking for internal consistency and second, by checking against all other possible sources of related evidence. The question of validity arises when a discussion on the 'truth-quality' of the data points to the existence of many truths. To be on the right track and to be able to answer the research question, there is a need for the researcher to be disciplined by data and also to be careful about the source of the data as well. Interpretation of information collected is another form of problem usually arises in life history approach which involves transcription of recordings. Transcripts are not copies of some original reality but an interpretation of data in the form of words and sentences recorded. Often the researcher does not recognise the value of the interview transcript immediately, but only after he/she has done some additional interpretive work. Usually what

is being done to overcome the confusion arises from the interpretation of questions, for example the researcher tries to arrange the occurrence of events by specific dates. This includes family events such as wedding dates and children's birthday with dates related to their career and make sure that the dates are consistent.

METHODOLOGY

The study from which this article is drawn is entitled 'Occupational segregation by gender'. We have chosen to study women who are involved in formal and informal work. Our objective was to collect life histories of informants, a tool through which we hoped the informants' experiences, thoughts and feelings might be expressed. The life history interviews were extensive and intimate. Sampling unit of 12 families were chosen from families that had three generations whether they were in the nucleus or extended family unit. The second generation is set as the main sample according to the highest level of education received. The families were chosen using snowball technique. They were interviewed in the home to explore subjective accounts of their experiences and each set of interviews was introduced in the same way. We explained that the primary aim of the interview was to gather information on employment and other events in each woman's life since she entered the formal educational system. The research sought to observe change through time. The life history interview became an occasion for storytelling where the informants were encouraged to recount a set of their life experiences. Through open-ended techniques of questioning, within minimal direction from the researcher, the informants were encouraged to reflect on past experiences. Information regarding informant's attitude towards formal work that is, working hours, relationship at the work place, job performance, opportunities for promotion and problems faced as a working women and the types of housework carried out by members of the family were obtained.

The data on the work history of each woman is continuous, with information on events at selected points in their lives. The respondents were asked about the sequence of their working activities between starting schooling until the time of the survey. They were requested to recall each job and to describe it, specifying the year in which they began, its duration, and the reasons for selecting a certain job or reasons for leaving. The same methodology was used to obtain data on other aspects of their lives, such as education and marital history, which could build up a more complete description of the main socioeconomic factors which influence, and are influenced by, women's participation in the labour force. The women were encouraged to discuss anything else that they felt were related to the objective of the research. An interview lasted about one to three hours. Each woman was interviewed more than once. We tried to elicit specific incidents rather than generalized statements. Discreet memories were more likely to capture the texture of the women's experiences and to highlight the variations among the different women in their life histories and in their interpretations of these stories. There was considerable variation in the women's willingness to be drawn into these processes, but overall, the interviews were successful. Each woman opened a piece of her working life to us, and each piece reflected on, and deepened our understanding of the experiences of the others. In terms of data analysis, we tape-recorded and transcribed the interviews and did a preliminary analysis of each interview. We can see some differences in the way of how and what the three generations tell about their lives and work. The result was presented in the form of storytelling.

STRENGTH AND WEAKNESSES OF LIFE HISTORY APPROACH

The strength and weaknesses of life history approach are listed below:

a) Strengths of life history approach

- i. Life history approach used open-ended questions with little directives from the researchers and giving lengthy explanation by the informants. Using this method of data collection helps provide depth and detail information.
- ii. Collecting data related to life history does not restrict to only one informant. Informants can be from a small sample.
- iii. Life history approach tells the story about the research subject. Therefore, this method can provide information regarding the informant's real life. This information is not available in questionnaires which usually give static and uninteresting information.
- iv. The opportunity to understand the social process that takes place in the informant's life at a certain time period.
- v. The ability to approach the social and economic space of the informant.
- vi. Life history gives detail description of specific acts, events, relationships and circumstances in particular lives. When reading them, we understand social change in a better way. This is one advantage of using life history to study social change.
- vii. Ability to interpret their own lives and themselves that is the past, the present and the changes they recognised. Life history is more than thick descriptions of observable changes in behavior and circumstances.
- viii. A proper focus on historical change can be attained in a way that is lacking in other methods, that is moving between the changing biographical history of the informants and the social history of his life-span. A life history cannot be told without a constant reference to historical changes.
- ix. Helps to make sense of changes in social character, in individual lives, and in society. Without the perspective of time it is difficult to see what many small changes amount to. We study people's life experience: turning points and daily rituals, relationship with other people, commonplace situations such as meals and household duties. By accumulating and organising these details, we arrive at the ideas of social structure and social change. Indeed, the more we care about details, the better our generalisations fit into the reality of people's experience.
- x. Attempts to avoid pre-judgements.

b) Weaknesses of life history approach

- i. This approach which is qualitative in nature requires the researcher to collect data in relation to the life history of individual in depth and detail and usually takes a long time.
- ii. There is problem in the sampling technique, that is in terms of sampling size and the method of selecting the sample. Usually, the sample size is small.

- iii. Less easily generalized.
- iv. Difficult to aggregate data and make systematic comparisons.
- v. Dependent upon researcher's personal attributes and skills.
- vi. Participation in setting can always change the social situation.

From the strengths and weaknesses of life history approach, we can conclude that this approach can be used to complement findings of other methods as well as used on its own. The role of researcher as a communicator is important. The researcher needs to possess various communication skills.

STRATEGIES USED BY RESEARCHERS TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITHIN INDIVIDUALS

The following lists the strategies used by researchers to communicate effectively with individuals:

i. An excellent listener

A good communicator requires one to be an excellent listener in the dialogue rather than an active interviewer. In this manner, there emerges new topics in every interview, and all interviews are different in character. Researcher should be able to encourage informants to communicate their underlying attitudes, beliefs and values.

ii. An excellent listener is one who is

- a. Willing to lend one's ear, eyes, and heart to informant's messages. The messages are verbal (words uttered by the informants) or non-verbal (body language such as facial expressions, body movements and dressing of the informants).
- b. open-minded, that is willingness to accept ideas from the informants. Some informants may avoid describing certain aspects of behaviour or attitude that are inconsistent with their preferred self-image.

iii. A good talker

The researcher must possess good communication skills, such as a good talker with all level of people. Researcher should make the informants feel at ease and therefore more willing to tell 'their story'. The result is that the researchers most often will experience a close relationship with the informants and probably feel obliged to protect data collected from 'outsiders' such as other researchers.

iv. Possess good social skill

Researcher should be able to interact throughout the research process of data collection. The informants will not be anonymous to the researcher and therefore the relationship between informants and researcher strengthen the researcher's loyalty towards the informants. Researcher too should know how to convince/ persuade people to be his/her informant. It is very important to get consent from the individual. Therefore, researcher should be very careful about their initial explanation of the objective of carrying out the research. The ability to establish contact is another quality that a good researcher should possess so that he/she can communicate in order to make the informant share his/her ideas.

v. Possess good persuasion skill

Researcher should also have the ability to encourage the informant to produce an answer to questions being raised. If this fails, the researcher will have to do a slight rephrase of the question. To be able to collect detailed information, a researcher should have a good probing skill, that is the ability to persuade / encourage informant to reveal more information. Probing involves follow-up questioning to get a fuller response. It may be non-verbal or verbal. An expectant glance can function as a probe as much as a direct request likes 'please tell me more about that'. We probe all the time in normal conversation and our objective is to have a 'guided conversation'. However, the probe should be as neutral as possible. It should not incline the informant to a particular response. What usually takes place is from the researcher's comment that they have heard others express some views and what does the informant think of that views. Sometimes the researcher will talk about 'sharing' their views on certain issue, say what they think or have experienced. Probing can be said to be a key interviewing skill in life history approach. It is all about encouraging the informant to give an answer and as detail and in-depth as possible. To get informants to expand their answers the following probes may be used:

- i. an expectant glance
- ii. what else?
- iii. what other reasons?
- iv. please tell me more about that
- v. I'm interested in all of your reasons

When to probe? Whenever the researcher judge that the informant's statement is ambiguous. Generally, anything that would make the researcher wonder what the informant meant in a normal conversation would be worth probing in an interview. So responses like 'This is important' should always be probed, perhaps by asking the informant 'What do you mean by "important"? The researcher's task is to draw out all relevant responses and to be neutral towards the topic under discussion. Probing needs skill because it can easily lead to bias.

CONCLUSIONS

The earlier discussion clearly shows the suitability and appropriateness of life history approach as research method in understanding social issues such as health, crime and economy. A researcher obtains information regarding the individual's attitude and experiences of his own live story. For example, in our study on woman's life and work, we found that the life history approach is useful and capable of providing a unique insight of the information required. In order to understand something as intensely personal as working women, it is important to know about the woman as a person. Also, to understand woman's behavior, it is important to understand how each woman sees herself as a worker. When studying woman's work, the professional self comes to a focus. An important part of the professional self is constituted by the knowledge, opinions and values held by each woman about her professional activities. Individuals interpret their everyday life subjectively, but simultaneously generate their life situation by their own thinking and action. Research on woman's lives has deepened our understanding of how woman develop their own self, how their careers change over the years and how they develop their thinking. Life history

approach can also be used to examine one's health and lives. This approach will enable us to obtain data on subjective elements of one's lifestyle and health status. The assumption being that one's lifestyle shapes his/her health status, that is, awareness, consciousness and behavior.

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