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## Biographical methods

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# Biographical Methods

Joanna Bornat

Had I been writing this chapter only a few years ago I would have had a much easier task. But now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, containing developments in biographical methods in under eight thousand words, borders on the impossible. What was an area of work scarcely acknowledged beyond groups of committed oral historians, occasional sociologists, auto/biographers and ethnographers 20 years ago has become a vast and constantly changing and expanding ferment of creative work, drawing in new as well as career-old researchers. In critical pedagogy, cultural studies, critical race theory, gerontology, decolonising research, social policy, health studies, feminisms, identity theory, studies of sexuality, employment, family and management theory, the range of areas in which biographical methods have been taken up is vast. All reach for meaning and accounts in individual biographies to both confirm and complicate understandings of the working and emergence of social processes and relationships in place and through time. And this is only within academe. Telling your story, the public confessional, the personal account has become a totally pervasive form, as any quick check through the media

will show. Simply putting a term such as 'life story' into Google brings hundreds and thousands of hits. This is all good news, if difficult to assimilate.

Biographical methods thrive on invention and have changed and adapted to methodological, theoretical and technological change. The arrival of the small portable audio recording machine has undoubtedly played a leading role. Indeed it would be impossible to imagine much of what is now recognised as biographical work without it. Gone are the days when to record interviews was seen as a form of journalism, to be eschewed by sociologists and anthropologists in the field<sup>1</sup>. Now we have the capability to capture not only sounds but visual expression too and to send the information round the world, or next door in a matter of seconds.

In this chapter, I focus on ways in which individual life experience is generated, analysed and drawn on to explain the social world. However generated, the common denominator is that accounts are solicited and told in the first person. I focus on three very different approaches, briefly outlining each in turn and finally look at some ways to distinguish each in a final, and unashamedly

partisan argument for the contribution of oral history.

## BIOGRAPHICAL METHODS

'Biographical methods' is an umbrella term for an assembly of loosely related, variously titled activities: narrative, life history, oral history, autobiography, biographical interpretive methods, storytelling, auto/biography, ethnography, reminiscence. These activities tend to operate in parallel, often not recognising each other's existence, some characterised by disciplinary purity with others demonstrating deliberate interdisciplinarity. To explain and present such disparity feels like a demanding intellectual undertaking. History, psychology, sociology, social policy, anthropology, even literature and neurobiology at times, all have a part to play.

By their very nature, biographical methods encourage a universalistic and encompassing approach, encouraging understanding and interpretation of experience across national, cultural and traditional boundaries better to understand individual action and engagement in society. See for example Prue Chamberlayne and Annette King's comparative study of family caring in East and West Germany and Britain drawing on biographical interview data (Chamberlayne & King, 2000), James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson's life history interviews with UK migrants to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s (Hammerton & Thomson, 2005), and the African-American women's accounts of their professional lives in Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis's study (1993).

The personal and individual nature of biographical data adds an additional layer of complexity. Biographical researchers work with a range of different types of data including diaries, notebooks, interactive websites, videos, weblogs and written personal narratives with methods of collection varying from the directly interventionist in, for example oral history interviewing, to a more detached encouragement and stimulation to write and record as in the collection of accounts through

an archive like Mass Observation or on-line interactive websites.

How best then to give shape and meaning to this task? How to organise and communicate a framework which is an aid to understanding and which provides a manageable and yet inclusive approach to presenting biographical methods? In sorting through the various activities I looked for themes which would bring out the strengths of biographical approaches while highlighting what are for me the most innovative and creative aspects of the contribution they make to social research methods. On that basis the themes I will be working with are: interactivity, subjectivity, and structuring. I'll explain briefly what I mean by each of these themes.

By interactivity I mean the generation of data through some kind of direct social interaction. This is likely to be an interview or at least a situation which involves, or has involved, face-to-face verbal exchange. This leads to the inclusion of biographical interpretive methods, oral history, reminiscence, storytelling, life history and narrative, but not autobiography, auto/biography or ethnography. By choosing subjectivity I am highlighting the extent to which the method leads to the expression of the self, a focus on feelings and emotions providing insight into individual perceptions and understandings of situations and experiences. All the activities I have identified could be included under this theme, though some for example oral history, have at different times, and in varying settings shown less attention to the self, while for others, for example auto/biography, the positioning of the self, as generator or reader of the text has been a main focus of attention (Stanley, 1994).

With structuring I intend to convey the idea that biographical methods aim to generate accounts or data which, either by means of direct questioning, or through the nature of individuals' own responses, have an obvious or implicit structure. Again, this feels all-inclusive as what account, either told or expressed, does not have some kind of narrative, a beginning or an ending? Or what story is not connected in some way to the

bigger picture, be it childbirth, war, schooling or sexuality? This may indeed be the case; however by structuring, I mean to convey the idea that the methods used rely on some kind of prior theorising or framework of ideas on the part of the researcher. This is not to rule out informal structuring or the kind of everyday theorising people develop in order to explain their lives but for my purposes here to emphasise the contribution which the theorising and methods of particular disciplines, such as psychology, sociology or history make to the generation of the data. So, I would exclude storytelling and autobiography from this particular category.

Finally, context; by this I mean the ways in which an individual account, or set of accounts, is given meaning by its own framework of time and space and by those of the researcher and interpreter of the data. Context is not only to be seen in terms of setting or the historical time or social and political structures surrounding a particular account; it also includes the agency and agendas of researcher and researched, their biographical time. Autobiography and storytelling fit less well once again. Where the main source is the single-authored account generated independently *for* an audience, rather than *with* another, context has fewer dimensions for exploration.

The burgeoning of interest in the perspective of the individual, in what has been described as a more 'humanistic' approach in sociological research has resulted in a number of review articles and books which in their different ways have helpfully sketched out origins and developments in work with biography (Plummer, 2001; Thompson, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Seale et al., 2004; Thomson, 2007). This is an exciting area in which to work. Biographical work engages with many of the most telling and enduring epistemological and methodological issues in the human sciences taking in debates on validity, memory, subjectivity, standpoint, ethics, voice and representivity amongst others (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 3).

The three methods I have chosen to concentrate on have shared antecedents in

most respects, but with some individual differences which show the distinctiveness of each. In what follows I draw on several of the works cited above where these lineages and identities are drawn out. A familiar starting point is the group of sociologists known as the 'Chicago School' and their work in the first 40 years of the twentieth century. The focus on the collection of direct testimony and on observation under realistic conditions led to methodological innovation in a number of areas. Urban society came under scrutiny, with studies of poverty, street gangs, poverty and high life. Alongside this strongly engaged and situated commitment came a new development in social psychology. Herbert Mead's idea of 'the self' (1934) stressed the significance of language, culture and non-verbal communication, with its focus on social interaction and reflection in the development of the individual's sense of who they are. His notion of the self as having its own meaning and sense of reality, identifiable and recognisable in relation to social or historical context, provided a challenge to arguments which gave primacy to the investigator's or commentator's perspective. Students, teachers and researchers associated with the Chicago School were to generate some of the most influential developments in sociology; amongst these were symbolic interactionism (Plummer, 1991) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968).

It is with this background in mind that I now go on to take a closer look at the first of the three methods I identified under the biographical 'umbrella': the biographical interpretive method.

### **Biographical interpretive method**

Fritz Schütze, a sociologist writing in 1980s Germany is usually credited with the originating work which led to the development of the biographical interpretive method. He was greatly influenced by 'third generation Chicagoans' such as Anselm Strauss, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman and others (Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000, p. 58). The interview method and its subsequent analysis

which he developed and which has been further refined by Gabriele Rosenthal (2004), who followed his theoretical and methodological lead, requires the separating out of the chronological story from the experiences and meanings which interviewees provide. The process depends on an understanding of the biographical interview as a process in which movement between past, present and future is constant and in which the interviewee may not be fully aware of the contexts and influences in their life.

Rosenthal and her erstwhile collaborator Wolfgang Fischer, developed this approach into what is now usually known as 'biographical interpretive analysis' or 'biographic narrative interpretive analysis' (Wengraf, 2001). She had been interested in explaining work and life ethics in post World War II West German society being convinced that the sense which people made of their lives under the Third Reich played a central role (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 49). Since Rosenthal and Fischer's early development, the method has been given much more elaborated treatment, using individual case study analysis, based on interview transcripts, by Prue Chamberlayne and colleagues. Their particular interest has been to theorize and explain the impact of social welfare policies through embracing the subjectivity and agency of welfare recipients, linking private and public spheres, as these are experienced, expressed and represented through individual accounts (Chamberlayne & King, 2000; Chamberlayne et al., 2000, 2004).

The systematization inherent in this approach requires the elaborate codification of the interview in such a way as to identify themes, having separated out the 'lived life' from the 'told story' in the transcribed interview (Wengraf, 2001, p. 231). This distinction separates the chronological sequence of the events of a life from the way that story is told. By identifying how someone relates to their story, in the telling, labelling text segments as to whether they are descriptive, argumentative, reporting, narrative or evaluative, biographical interpretive analysis addresses the

qualitative data with hypotheses which draw on significant segments of text. Wengraf (2001) details the procedure for interpreting biographical data, showing with a detailed account, how hypotheses are arrived at and then worked through, as the life story is explored. Life events, as told by the interviewee, are looked at and hypotheses and counter hypotheses drawn up and explored, preferably by groups of people working together, as to their likely effect on someone's later life.

This phenomenological approach to understanding biographical data focuses on the individual's perspective within an observable and knowable historical and structural context, and what it is like to be the person describing their lives and the various decisions, turns and patterns of that life (Wengraf, 2001, pp. 305–6).

At one level what Wengraf is describing is a complex process of interpretation, a shared and carefully documented practice of searching for themes in data typical of a grounded theory approach (Wengraf, 2001, p. 280). However, at quite another level the analysis expects a deep level of explanation and interpretation, one which looks for hidden and explicit meanings in the transcript. Just how this differs from the other two approaches I've identified, I will come back to later in this chapter.

### **Oral history**

The particular combination of methods that oral history derives from the discipline of sociology is approaches to data generation and to data analysis. Even though the development of the interview as a tool of investigation has a much longer history, the significance of the Chicago School, as Paul Thompson points out in his seminal text, *The Voice of the Past*, was its effect on the idea of the life history (2000). The interview became more than simply extraction of information around specific topics; it became an object in itself with shape and totality given by the individual's told life events.

In an early essay, the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, argues 'What makes oral history different'. Having identified oral history's particular qualities as 'the orality of oral sources' arguing for attention to the sounds and turns of speech as opposed to the written transcript and as 'narrative', pointing out variations in narrative forms and styles, he goes on to argue oral history's unique qualities. These are, he suggests, 'that it tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*' (his emphases) and that 'the unique and precious element which oral sources possess in equal measure is the speaker's subjectivity' (1981, p. 67). From this, he argues that, 'oral sources' have a '*different credibility*' (p. 100, his emphasis), that 'today's narrator is not the same person as took part in the distant events he or she is relating' (p. 102). It follows, therefore that, 'Oral sources are *not objective*' they are '*artificial, variable and partial*' (p. 103, his emphases).

Portelli's position has been taken up subsequently in studies of ethnicity, class, gender, colonialism, tradition, displacement, resistance, exclusion, by oral historians who see the method as particularly suited to understandings of oppression and marginalisation. With this unashamedly political and partisan approach to history, making its contribution to the histories of elites was always going to be less likely, though there have been some exceptions, for example Courtney & Thompson's study of business elites in the city of London (1997) and Seldon and Pappworth's case studies of elites in their handbook of elite oral history (1983).

Oral history in its early and subsequent development has drawn on sociology for methods of structuring data collection. Writing and researching in the context of the sociology department at the University of Essex in the mid 1960s (Thompson & Bornat, 1994), Thompson was familiar with the development of grounded theory as a solution to sampling from a population of survivors (2000, p. 151). While some studies have rested on only a handful of interviewees, for example Alessandro Portelli's investigation into local memory of a massacre of civilians

by German troops occupying Tuscany in 1944 (Portelli, 1997), or Al Thomson's use of four life histories in his exploration of the legend of Anzac solidarity amongst Australian World War I veterans (Thomson, 1994), oral historians more typically seek ways of representivity through theoretical sampling, with contacts made opportunistically or through snowballing (see for example Thompson, 1975; Bertaux, 1981; Lummis, 1987; Bornat, 2002; Hammerton & Thomson, 2005, Merridale, 2005). As for data analysis, a range of approaches, some more familiar to historians and some to sociologists, is typically followed by oral historians, who tend to take a more eclectic approach methodologically than researchers using the biographical interpretive method. In the main these would be recognisable as thematic in approach, drawing directly or indirectly on the type of constant comparative analysis and theme searching typical in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968).

Given oral history's early commitment to a form of history-making which seeks to give expression to marginalised voices with emphasis on the importance of language, emotions and oral qualities generally, data analysis presents something of a moral challenge as Thompson and others have pointed out (Borland, 1991; Portelli, 1997, pp. 64&ff; Thompson, 2000, p. 269&ff; Bornat & Diamond, 2007). The tension lies in a commitment to the presentation of actual words of interviewees while seeking a way to generalize from a number of stories without creating too much distance between the original recording or text and the resulting publication, be it hard copy, electronic or sound and vision presentation.

### ***Narrative analysis***

The third area of biographical activity I have identified, narrative analysis, also traces its origins back to the Chicago School. The move towards the subject as author and source of evidence, through the telling of their story became its defining feature in the 1920s. However, where those early sociologists of

the city were intent on capturing reality from accounts, narrative theorists see the story as a greater sum of parts than the particularities of events, atmospheres, environments, and relationships described. Catherine Kohler Riessman, a leading narratologist, explains how narratives interpreted through use of language, symbolic representations and cultural forms, provide access to understanding the workings across and within time of gender, class, culture, ethnicity, place and age, to name but a few social divisions and differences (1993, p. 5). This plurality does however, mean that as she also points out: 'There is considerable disagreement about the precise definition of narrative' (1993, p. 17).

A focus on story or narrative sees telling, relating and recounting as a central and universal human activity. Lives, it is argued, are constructed, lived and presented to listeners in storied forms. As Widdershoven argues: '... a story is never a pure ideal, detached from real life. Life and story are not two separate phenomena. They are part of the same fabric, in that life informs and is formed by stories' (Widdershoven, 2003, p. 109). For Polkinghorne, narrative has special significance for the human sciences. He argues that it is, '... the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action'. This very generality presents problems of definition he goes on to admit (1995, pp. 5–7).

Riessman's solution to the problem of definition is to account for narratives in terms of genre. Narratives are to be recognised to the extent to which they relate to a 'narrative genre' with its own 'persistence of certain elements'. She argues that the conventional idea of a story having characters acting in various ways and moving towards some kind of conclusion isn't a sufficiently broad enough definition. Her narrative genre includes accounts where the same event is described repeatedly – 'habitual narratives' – or which are 'topic-centred' where particular kinds of events are linked through a common theme or shared characteristic. She also includes 'hypothetical narratives' of events which never happened. What is distinctive,

she seems to be arguing, is that there is a 'teller', an account of 'a situation' and an audience: 'us' (Riessman, 1993, pp 18–19).

When it comes to analysing narrative data, Riessman and others point out (Andrews et al., 2004) '... there is no *one* (her emphasis) method' (1993, p. 5). Indeed the pervasiveness of narrative studies with use in, for example, medicine (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1998), anthropology (Skultans, 1998), psychology (Sarbin, 1986; Crossley, 2000), media studies (Ryan, 2004), feminist studies (Personal Narratives Group, 1989), linguistics (Bamberg, 1997), organisation studies (Denning, 2005), history (Roberts, 2001), and literature (Hawthorn, 1985) suggests a plethora of possible analytical procedures.

As a way to manage this diversity, to pull it within range of some reliable analytical framework which others can respond to and which for her preserves acknowledges the performative and interactive nature of the interview she advocates use of poetic and literary forms as analytical tools. These, she argues, enable her to identify how a narrative is put together and to see what are its particularities in terms of characteristics of speech and discourse (1993, p. 50–51). Seeking to keep 'the teller' in the centre of her analysis is 'starting from the inside' looking for meanings shown in the way the words are presented, not ignoring issues of power which may determine what is said and how (Riessman, 1993, p. 61). The perspective of the interpreter, their particular theoretical stance and even their personal history, is bound to play a part. Like the oral historians, this presents a dilemma for her but one which she feels can be resolved through a process of open reflection and questioning, as she puts it: 'the comfort of a long tradition of interpretive and hermeneutic enquiry' (1993, p. 61).

In these very brief sketches, I've identified what I see as the distinctive features of the biographical interpretive method, oral history and narrative method, focusing mainly on their antecedents and rather different approaches to the interpretation of personal accounts. To begin with, I used four themes

and on the basis of these selected the three approaches I've just been outlining from amongst all those which come under the heading: 'biographical'. The themes were: interactivity, subjectivity and structuring and context.

Before I go on to look at some differences between the three approaches, and with the aid of these themes, I want to consider what are the innovative and creative contributions of the biographical interpretive method, oral history and narrative analysis to social research methods generally. In my view, each approach highlights the interview as an example of social interaction in ways that draw on ideas of reflexivity and with reference to the significance of difference, each foregrounds the subjectivity, expressed feelings and meanings of the respondent, interviewee or subject. Yet for each, the structuring of the dialogue through the disciplinary antecedents of the particular approach is methodologically relevant. Finally, context, remembered, observed, researched, told and immediate, plays a significant role in each of the three methods. All of them, part of the 'biographical turn' in social science, are in different ways positioned '... within the shifting boundaries between history and sociology ... (and there) some of the most telling and stimulating debating issues have emerged' (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 3).

### **DRAWING OUT THE DIFFERENCES**

In the last part of this chapter I will take this comparison further, emphasising what are, in my opinion, three specific areas of difference and I will use some examples from interviews. However, this time I won't conceal my preference and standpoint. In identifying the interview as interrogative, emphasising the role of memory as a source for 'pastness' and by questioning levels of interpretive influence, I will argue that all these issues have been most effectively dealt with by oral historians. I will deal first with the interview as interrogative.

### ***The interview as interrogative***

To argue that the interview, the most typical source of biographical data is interrogative may appear to be a statement of the obvious (Bornat, 1994). After all, an interview involves questioning and the soliciting of answers, most effectively between two people though occasionally more. Why emphasise its obvious interrogative qualities? My reason for doing so is to draw attention to the dialogic qualities of an interview, to the significance of the relationship which develops, and to emphasise the intentions and perspective of the interviewer.

The approach taken in biographical interpretation is to use an initial question, and then to stand back, as it were. Having posed an initial question, where interest in a particular topic is expressed, the interviewee in the biographical interpretive interview is then left to relate a life narrative, if possible without interruption. A second phase then follows in which questions are asked as a means to expanding on themes, to clarify points made or ask for more detail about aspects of the life portrayed in the narrative.

In the oral history interview questioning drives the dialogue along in a quite deliberate way, in contrast. As Ken Plummer argues, oral history and life history interviews draw on 'researched and solicited stories ... (which) do not naturalistically occur in everyday life; rather they have to be seduced, coaxed and interrogated out of subjects' (Plummer, 2001, p. 28). The questioning and answering builds on itself, so that the interviewers have the complex task of listening while questioning, holding at least two, sometimes more, foci of interests, as the interviewees pursue their own story sometimes surprised at what they have remembered or have found themselves saying in response to a question or an opportunity to reflect. While the topic of the oral history interview will have been clear initially it is never possible to be certain how it will turn out as the dialogue develops.

I'll illustrate this with an excerpt from an interview I carried out in the early 1990s with Pat Hanlon (1915–1998), a well-known UK

cyclist when I interviewed her and four other women for an edited collection of writing on older women (Bornat, 1993). I invited her to tell me her life story, as a cyclist and businesswoman (she unusually for the cycling world ran her own shop in north London). She began with an unbroken account of her early years as a cyclist, replete with technical terms related to cycle racing and bike parts. I was keen to guide her towards talking more about the social world of cycling and took this opportunity with a question about her first husband:

*So was your first husband a cyclist as well?*

Yes, he was a cyclist, yes. But he used to go out with another club. We didn't go out with our club, because there wasn't any women in that club. I used to go out with the Actonia CC ... But I also belonged to the Clarion, which was a union all over the country, the Clarion were. Supposed to be Labour club, but I mean, I didn't go to it because it was a Labour club. Because they used to threaten to throw me out all the time, because I used to – didn't agree with what they said. You know, you're supposed to be Labour, you know, and half of them were communists. They used to go preaching down on the Dorking, on the hills and things like that. And I thought, I mean, wasting my time down there, you know, with that lot! So I used to go out on my own then.

*Were they strict then, about that?*

They were very strict about whether you were Labour or not, yes. Because if the heads there found you talking about you were – I mean, I wasn't anything really, but I used to annoy them, you know, when I said, I'm not Labour, I don't want to be Labour and all this. And they used to get ever so annoyed. And they said, well, we're going to get you chucked out, you know. I says, I don't care, you know. But, er, they never did.

*I suppose cycling was, it was quite a kind of what you might call a more working-class sort of leisure thing.*

It was mostly, oh yes, mostly poor people. I mean, there was never a car on the road when you raced. Only the time-keeper was the only car. I mean if you looked for the car, that was the start of your race ...

*And they'd all be people who would be, what working all week, like you, and spending all their weekends –*

Oh yes, there was, oh, it took years and years for wealthy people to start cycling. Their sons might cycle, and they used to come out in their big cars, you know, and watch their son racing. But that kind of thing didn't happen for years and years.

*Did you feel that it was a sort of – was that a part of the feel of it, do you think, that you were with people who were, you know, you were like a kind of group who were rather the same, or – ?*

Well, there wasn't very many wealthy people around in those days. If there were they were nothing to do with us. You know, they'd be in a different society. There was sort of two societies, wealthy people and poor people. Or moderately poor. But there was never all running into one like they do now these days.

*Did it feel like that did it? That you were very separate somehow?*

Well yes. Because they never did the things we did. You'd hear about them going to these dinners and things up the town, but it never, you didn't even know them, half of them. It was a different world. I mean, if we went to a dinner, it was only the one year dinner, our club dinner, that was the only dinner we ever went to. And I hadn't got any clothes to go out in. I had nothing, only cycle clothes, that was all I had. I worked in them, I did the housework in them. The milkman would knock the door and I was in my shorts, you know ...

As she answered my question about her husband I realised that she was beginning to talk about social and political divisions in the cycling world. This was something that interested me very much. Leaving behind, for the moment, the events of her life story, I began on a series of questions which I hoped would lead her into talk about the class politics of cycling between the two world wars in the UK. As is obvious from the transcript, I used various strategies. In the end she comes back to talk about herself as a cyclist, positioning herself as a cyclist first, then as a woman. It seems that for her, class and politics were an irrelevance, or in the case of the socialist Clarion movement, a means to an end: more cycling.

If I had used no prompts I might not have heard this particular account of her life, and the social world of cycling might well not have appeared at all. Biographical purists might argue that I was guilty of distorting Pat's story. In fact I would argue the opposite, that I was encouraging her to develop it and to reframe it through my interrogative dialogue. She would have told her story differently on another occasion, to another listener or interviewer. Undoubtedly I was bringing my particular 'cultural habitus'

(Hammersley, 1997) to that interview with all that this entailed. The idea that somehow it might be possible to render oneself invisible or non-interfering is regarded as mythical and certainly not desirable (Portelli, 1997, chapter 1; Thompson, 2000, p. 227; Bornat, 2004).

I make this point to contrast with both biographical interpretive and narrative approaches. As I have already shown the preferred approach in the biographical interpretive method is for a contained non-interventionist initial interview to be followed by questioning led by the interviewer. This separation of interviewer and interviewed through the privileging of the interviewee's account in the first interview and of the interviewer's interests in the second, excludes the possibility of a responsive interaction with joint initiative taking on both sides. In a contrasting way, though narrative approaches vary in their attitude to the part played by questions, their focus on the structure of the account in order to draw out the individual's perspective, similarly gives little weight to the dialogic possibilities of the interview. Context is relevant as Riessman emphasises, 'The text is not autonomous of its context' (1993, p. 21) and she rejects the model of a narrativist such as Labov who leaves out the interviewer-interviewee relationship in their analysis (cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 20). However, even in her hands, context, both historical and immediate is presented more as a framework than as part of the data and evidence of the interviewer's presence is typically excised from the text being analysed.

### **Memory as a source for 'pastness'**

Elizabeth Tonkin, an anthropologist and oral historian, prefers the term 'representations of pastness' to 'history'. She argues that though it is less elegant, it conveys more of a sense of movement between past and present as people speak and others listen (Tonkin, 1992, p. 2). The active role of memory in oral history making again distinguishes it from biographical interpretive and narrative research.

However, while memory gives us access to experience before our own time, to experience which might otherwise be unreachable since it is not recorded in documentary formats, it is not necessarily always accurate. For Portelli this is one of its very strengths. Confronted by old Communists whose tales of the past were sometimes partial, even plainly false, he turns the tables in a celebration of oral history's ability to reveal what really mattered to people, '... uncovering the contradiction between reality and desire' (Portelli, 1991, p. 116). 'Reality' for Portelli, as for other oral historians consists of corroboration from other interviews, archive data and other sources.

Memory also plays a function in the present and is as much about future hopes and intentions as it is about telling stories, bearing witness or confessing to past involvements and actions. It draws on and engages with collective representations and can change according to audience, stimuli and time of life (Coleman et al., 1998; Rose, 2003; Draaisma, 2004). Indeed the reliance of oral history on older people's memories means being aware of the psychological tasks facing older people towards the end of life (Bornat, 2001). 'Pastness' for older people therefore needs to be seen as a multidimensional remembering, but none the less valuable for that. I'll take this point further with an excerpt from an interview carried out for Margot Jefferys' research into the founders of geriatric medicine (Ogg et al., 1999; Jefferys, 2000).

Dr Ronald Dent, one of Jefferys' interviewees, was in his mid eighties at the time of his interview:

*What do you think of the new developments in the National Health Service? Do you have any views about that?*

Well, I'm a bit scared that a vulnerable group like the elderly sick might not benefit as much as they should. In fact I think they might be neglected a bit again. And that's what frightens me. One wouldn't like to feel that the work that all of us who had been in geriatric medicine, the work we've done to make it a good thing to do, might find, find that our work has been let down a little bit because hospitals are so quick, so busy doing routine ops — operations — which they get paid a lot for rather than looking after strokes and other problems of

the elderly which take a lot longer and need more resources. One hopes it's not like that<sup>2</sup>.

Some of Jefferys' interviewees had worked since before the NHS and in its very early days. Medical care of older people had been much neglected and was a major challenge for the health service. At the end of their careers these doctors were looking back at success, medically, and in policy terms. They had established a specialty and could point to a much better standard of care for older people, in hospital and in the community than they had witnessed in the ex Poor Law hospitals at the start of their careers. However, they were being interviewed at a time of change for the health service. Many expressed concern at the introduction after 1979 of a market model and business methods into health care. To add another contextual layer, these doctors were now themselves old. Contemplating the possible end to what they had achieved had specific personal resonance for their own healthcare. 'Pastness' is thus represented through multiple time frames, in this interview as in other oral history interviews: remembered time, the time of the interview, the 'time' of the interviewee and of the interviewer and our own time in looking back at these particular archived interviews (Bornat, 2005).

Memory as an individual and social practice and a process with known and observable features and effects is of central interest to oral historians in ways that it does not appear to be in biographical interpretive and narrative analysis. It enables a perspective which includes the effect of time and the influence of change and continuity while maintaining the agency of the individual as the central focus of interest.

### ***Interpretive influence***

The last of the three areas of difference I identify here is interpretive influence. By this I am drawing attention to the ways in which the three approaches I've been looking at position the interpreter of the data in relation to its originator, the interviewee. Oral history's

early commitment to a democratic purpose has led to some pointed debates about ownership and partnership (see for example Frisch, 1990). Some feminist oral historians have led the way in questioning assumptions as to any essential understanding or solidarity across the microphone, as I have already argued (Borland, 1991; Bornat & Diamond, 2007; see also Armitage & Gluck, 2002). The result for many oral historians is a practice which seeks to maintain the integrity of the original interview, and of the interviewee, by maintaining interpretive distance.

To identify the subjectivity of the interview, to put oneself in their place, to draw out understandings which are not necessarily articulated in the words of the transcript, are all recognisable and shared interpretive practices. To look and listen for silences, experiences or relationships which are unspoken or unexpressed, is acknowledged as appropriate and rewarding, but to go beyond this and to seek out subconscious motivations, or ways of thinking, is perhaps to be guilty of over-interpretation. While the researcher, who may or may not be the original interviewer, who has a duty to ask questions of the data, to theorise about it and about the people and experiences represented in it, to become more deeply embedded, risks distancing the interviewee from their own words. I'll use one final example to show where I feel that the line is drawn between oral history and biographical interpretive and narrative approaches.

I spent more than two hours with Pat Hanlon recording her life history. She gave me a detailed account of her progression as a cyclist to becoming one of the best wheel builders in the country, owning a shop and being married twice, once early and then again much later, as she retired. What she didn't tell me was that she had a son, from whom she was estranged. She didn't tell me and I didn't ask her. She only finally told me when I gave her the book chapter, in which she appears, to check for accuracy and representation. She then let me know that it might be better to mention her son as otherwise her friends might think this was a little strange.

To be silent about such a defining experience as motherhood, could be attributed to some deep personal flaw. I might turn to some psychological explanations for this apparent pathology on her part; I could look back through the transcript for clues as to her mindset and evidence of suppression of maternal instincts, her predilection for shorts perhaps, or an apparently obsessive interest in mileage. I could hypothesise as to her decision-making and her reflection on her life from the way she accounts for the events in her life. I could counterpose her lived life to her told life, drawing out inferences as to her motivations and tendencies as a mother and a woman. But, in the end I find this to be a process of distancing and indeed of subjecting Pat to an over-interpreted reconstruction of her life. She may have actively chosen not to mention her son because to mention him would be upsetting. She may have decided to focus exclusively on her life as a cyclist; indeed she made few references to other aspects of her personal life, and only when prompted by me. She may have retold the narrative of her life for herself so that her son was given no role. She might also have felt, as a public person, that her private life would be of little interest to me. Least possible, she may simply have forgotten to mention her son. Whatever the reason, I can't know and though I could speculate and develop a theory relating to some developmental deficiency I can see no advantage in this. To carry out more interviews with older women cyclists might give me a better idea of Pat's life in context. As it is, I have only her testimony to go on. Perhaps what I can draw out of this experience is a sense of inadequacy as an interviewer. For once my interrogative powers failed me.

But there is also another angle to interpretive influence and this is the question of ethics. How far is it ethical to subject another person's life to interpretation if the process and outcome are likely to be unrecognisable to them? How acceptable is an interpretation in which there is no possibility of continuing dialogue and discussion, particularly where the data originated in an interview relationship?

These are difficult questions to answer, complicated by new debates about the ethics of the secondary analysis of archived data (Bornat, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

The three biographical methods I have discussed in this chapter each has a distinctive practice and, though they share origins in the Chicago School of Sociology, they have developed along rather different interdisciplinary lines. Where the biographical interpretive method lends itself to more psychoanalytic interpretations of motivation and meaning, narrative analysis leans more towards sociolinguistics, while oral history draws across both sociology and history. Each gives centrality to the individual account in attempting to explain the changing nature and persistence of social relations and social structures. While each makes use of the interview to generate data, only oral history continues to focus on the dynamics of the interview through the process of interpretation and discussion. I have admitted a partisan position in my relationship with oral history but that is not to ignore the contribution of the other two approaches. In looking for ways to pin down the process of interrogating the data they force us to pay attention to explaining our thinking and analytical procedures, highlighting the detail which a phenomenological approach demands. My only concern is that in doing so we risk an over-interpretation which rather than emphasising the qualities of the original teller, eclipses them and puts the interpreter in a position of authority and control.

## NOTES

1 Fieldwork training for some trainee sociologists in the 1960s involved making notes after the interview or observation. Taping was definitely frowned on as a poor substitute for skills in observation and recall (Graham Fennell, personal communication).

2 Margot Jefferys Interview number 306, deposited at the British Library Sound Archive.

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