

Handbook of
**INTERVIEW
RESEARCH**

Context & Method

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THE LIFE STORY INTERVIEW

◆ Robert Atkinson

Telling the stories of our lives is so basic to our nature that we are largely unaware of its importance. We think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through stories. People everywhere are telling stories about some pieces of their lives to friends and strangers alike. The stories we tell of our lives carry ageless, universal themes or motifs and are always variations of one of the thousands of folktales, myths, or legends that have spoken to us for generations of our inner truths (see Narayan and George, Chapter 39, this volume). Stories connect us to our roots.

In traditional communities of the past, stories played a central role in the lives of the people. It was through story that the timeless elements of life were transmitted. Stories told from generation to generation carried enduring values as well as lessons about life lived deeply. Traditional stories followed a timeless and universal pattern

that can be represented as separation, transition, incorporation (van Gennep 1960), birth, death, rebirth (Eliade 1954), or as departure, initiation, return (Campbell 1968). This pattern is like a blueprint, or an original form, within which the story communicates a balance between opposing forces. The pattern actually forms the basis for the plot of a story and aids the storyteller in remembering the elements of a story while keeping the story on the course on which it is meant to be.

The stories we tell of our own lives today are still guided by the same patterns and enduring elements. Our lives unfold according to an innate blueprint, following the pattern of beginning, muddle, and resolution, with many repetitions of this pattern. Our lives consist of a series of events and circumstances that are drawn from a well of archetypal experiences common to all other human beings. It is within this ageless and universal context that we can best be-

gin to understand the importance and power of the life story interview and how it is fundamental to our very nature.

Storytelling is in our blood. We are the storytelling species. Stories were once the center of community life. We are recognizing more readily now that there is something of the gods and goddesses inside us, in the stories we tell of our own lives. Life storytelling gives us direction, validates our own experience, restores value to living, and strengthens community bonds.

The reasons we tell our stories today can be traced to the original functions of the earliest known stories. Myths and folktales have traditionally served four classic functions, bringing us into accord with ourselves, with others, with the mystery of life, and with the universe around us (Campbell 1970). A living mythology contains symbols, motifs, and archetypes that speak to us on a fundamentally human level; they reverberate beyond the personal and into the collective realm. They carry a power that connects with that deepest part of ourselves. Sacred, or traditional, stories touch a center of life that we all have within us.

Life stories, too, serve the same classic functions, by carrying the timeless themes and motifs found in a living mythology into our own lives. As we tell our life stories, ageless themes and motifs emerge that link us to our ancestors. Life stories serve these classic functions in four distinct realms. First, stories, with their deeply human elements and motifs, can guide us psychologically, stage by stage, through the entire life course. They foster an unfolding of the self and help us to center and integrate ourselves by gaining a clearer understanding of our experiences, our feelings about them, and their meaning for us. The stories we tell of our lives bring order to our experiences and help us to view our lives both subjectively and objectively at the same time while assisting us in forming our identities.

Second, stories can affirm, validate, and support our own experiences socially and clarify our relationships to those around us. They enforce the norms of a moral order

and shape the individual to the requirements of the society. Stories help us understand our commonalities and bonds with others as well as our differences. Stories foster a sense of community.

Third, stories can serve a mystical-religious function, by bringing us face-to-face with an ultimate mystery. Stories awaken feelings of awe, wonder, humility, respect, and gratitude in recognition of the mysteries around us. These feelings help us participate in the mystery of being. Stories take us beyond the here and now, beyond our everyday existence, and allow us to enter the realm of the spirit, the domain of the sacred.

And finally, stories can render a cosmology, an interpretive total image of the universe that is in accord with the knowledge of the time, a worldview that makes sense of the natural workings of the universe around us. Stories help us to understand the universe of which we are a part, and how we fit into it.

When our life stories are told in a way that follows this ageless pattern of transformation, they can carry the power and force of living myth for us and our listeners, by bringing about insights, sentiments, and commitments that can result in a new level of maturity, new responsibilities, and possibly even a new status. We seem to be recognizing more now that everyone has a story, even many, to tell about his or her life, and that the stories we have to tell are indeed important (Atkinson 1995, 1998; Kenyon and Randall 1997; Randall 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 1998).

♦ *Development of Interest in the Life Story*

People in many academic disciplines have been interviewing others for their life stories for longer than we often recognize. As far as I can determine, and as I use the term here, the life story interview has evolved

from oral history, life history, and other ethnographic and field approaches. Life story interviewing is a qualitative research method for gathering information on the subjective essence of one person's entire life that is transferable across disciplines.

As a method of looking at life as a whole, and as a way of carrying out in-depth study of individual lives, the life story interview stands alone. It has become a central element of the burgeoning subfield of the narrative study of lives (Cohler 1988; Josselson and Lieblich 1993), for its interdisciplinary applications in understanding single lives in detail and how the individual plays various roles in society (Cohler 1993; Gergen and Gergen 1993).

The use of life narratives for serious academic study is considered to have begun in psychology with Sigmund Freud's (1957, 1958) psychoanalytic interpretation of individual case studies, although these were based on secondary documents. Freud used these narratives primarily in applying his psychoanalytic theory to individual lives. Gordon Allport (1942) used personal documents to study personality development in individuals, focusing on primary documents, including narratives, while also considering the problems of reliability and validity of interpretation associated with using such materials. This method reached its maturation in Erik Erikson's (1958, 1969) studies of Luther and Gandhi. Erikson (1975) also used the life history to explore how the historical moment influences lives.

Henry Murray (1938, 1955) was one of the first to study individual lives using life narratives primarily to understand personality development. The recent interest in story on the part of personality psychologists, other social scientists, and scholars in diverse disciplines reflects the broader interest in narrative as it serves to illuminate the lives of persons in society. Theodore Sarbin (1986) uses narrative for understanding human experience, identifying it as the "root metaphor" and placing it at the

core of self-formation, whereas Jerome Bruner (1986) employs narrative as an important means for discovering how we "construct" our lives. The narrative study of lives, as presented in a series of books edited by Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (1993, 1995, 1999; Josselson 1996; Lieblich and Josselson 1994, 1997), aims to further the theoretical understanding of individual life narratives through in-depth studies, methodological examinations, and theoretical explorations.

The life history has long been a primary methodology of anthropological field work. As James Spradley (1979) points out, some life histories are heavily edited by the ethnographer (often only 60 percent of the description is actually in the insider's own words or language), whereas others are presented in the same form in which they were recorded. The life history interview and the life story interview are very similar in their approaches and what they cover, but the specific information sought and final products can be very different. In folklore, the term *life story* is used much as *life history* is in anthropology, with the focus usually being on the role of the interviewee in the community as a tradition bearer (see Titon 1980; Ives 1986).

Because of the broad interdisciplinary use of the life story, as well as the particular approach of each interviewer or researcher, the final forms of life stories can vary greatly. On the one hand, a life story can read as mostly the researcher's own description of what was said, done, or intimated. On the other, it can be a 100 percent first-person narrative in the words of the person interviewed.

As a research tool that is gaining much interest and use in many disciplines today, the life story interview is employed by researchers who take two primary approaches: the constructionist and the naturalistic. Some narrative researchers conceive of the life story as a circumstantially mediated, constructive collaboration between the interviewer and interviewee.

This approach stresses the situated emergence of the life story as opposed to the subjectively faithful, experientially oriented account. In the constructionist perspective, life stories are evaluated not so much for how well they accord with the life experiences in question, but more in terms of how accounts of lives are used by a variety of others, in addition to the subjects whose lives are under consideration, for various descriptive purposes (see Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000a, 2000b).

My own approach to the life story, which is based in a naturalistic, person-centered view, has evolved from an interdisciplinary context, beginning more than 30 years ago with my graduate study of folklore, when I interviewed an elder tradition bearer for his life story. I went on to pursue a second master's degree in counseling, and I began to see the power not only in telling but in retelling, or composing and recomposing, recasting and reframing, one's own story, and especially in getting to one's deeper or larger story. In my doctoral work, which focused on cross-cultural human development, I further expanded this interest by using the life story interview to explore how cultural values and traditions influence development across the life cycle.

I have felt that it is important, in trying to understand other persons' experiences in life or their relations to others, to let their voices be heard, to let them speak for and about themselves first. If we want to know the unique perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in that person's own voice. I am also interested in having the person tell his or her story from the vantage point that allows the individual to see his or her life as a whole, to see it subjectively across time as it all fits together, or as it seems discontinuous, or both. It is, after all, this subjective perspective that tells us what we are looking for in all our research efforts. This is what constitutes the individual's reality of his or her world. Storytellers are the first interpreters

of the stories they tell. It is through their construction of their realities, and the stories they tell about those realities, that we, as researchers, learn what we want to from them.

Since creating the Center for the Study of Lives at the University of Southern Maine in 1988, I have tried to merge all these interests, not only in building bridges across disciplines but in building a growing archive of life stories, currently numbering over 500, to offer researchers with various purposes and interests a unique database. Most of the life stories in the archive were gathered by my graduate students for class projects designed for them to learn as much as possible about how one person views his or her own development over time and across the life cycle. The life stories in the archives are available to all researchers for secondary analysis and can be searched by topics or by categories on the cover sheets.

I believe that there is much in each life story to identify the unique value and worth of each life, and that there are many common elements, motifs, and issues that all life stories express, indeed that we all share as human beings, along with some differences that exist. As an example of how I have used life stories, I have looked for important life themes that emerge in a person's telling of his or her story. These might explain coherence, how and why the story holds together, even if it also contains disruptions. Life themes also highlight important influences and relationships. In a small group of life story interviews with elders, I looked for the life-as-a-whole perspective and explored how the themes of continuity, purpose, commitment, and meaning were expressed in their lives (Atkinson 1985).

Life stories have gained respect and acceptance in many academic circles. Psychologists see the value of personal narratives for understanding development and personality (Runyan 1982; McAdams 1993). Anthropologists use the life history, or individual case study, as the preferred

unit of study for their measures of cultural similarities and variations (Spradley 1979; Langness and Frank 1981; Abu-Lughod 1993). Sociologists use life stories to understand and define relationships and group interactions and memberships (Bertaux 1981; Linde 1993). In education, life stories have been used as a new way of knowing and teaching (Witherell & Noddings 1991). Literary scholars use autobiographies as texts through which to explore questions of design, style, content, literary themes, and personal truth (Olney 1980). Historians find in using the oral history approach that life story materials are an important source for enhancing local history (Allen and Montell 1981).

The movement toward life stories, where we tell our own stories in our own words, is a movement toward acknowledging personal truth from the subjective point of view as well as a movement toward the validity of narrative. A life story narrative highlights the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime. As such, a life story narrative can be both a valuable experience for the person telling the story and a successful research endeavor for the one gathering the data.

This movement is championed by Bruner (1986, 1987, 1990, 1991), a cognitive psychologist who has illustrated that we actually construct personal meaning (and reality) during the making and telling of our narratives, that our own experiences take the form of the narratives we use to tell about them. According to Bruner, stories are our way of organizing, interpreting, and creating meaning from our experiences while maintaining a sense of continuity through it all. A promising direction is gerontologist James Birren's continuing use of "guided autobiography" as a source of psychological and social science research (see Birren and Birren 1996). Guided autobiography is the relating of a life by the one who has experienced it, but with the assistance of an experienced storyteller or writer (see Kenyon, Clark, and de Vries 2001).

♦ *Defining a Life Story*

An individual life and the role it plays in the larger community are best understood through story. We become fully aware, fully conscious, of our own lives through the process of putting them together in story form. It is through story that we gain context and recognize meaning. Reclaiming story is part of our birthright. Telling our stories enables us to be heard, recognized, and acknowledged by others. Telling a life story makes the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed, and the confusing clear.

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person remembers of it and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. The resulting life story is the narrative essence of what has happened to the person. It can cover the time from birth to the present or before and beyond. It includes the important events, experiences, and feelings of a lifetime.

There is very little difference between a life story and a life history. The two terms are often used interchangeably. The difference between a life story and an oral history is usually emphasis and scope. An oral history most often focuses on a specific aspect of a person's life, such as work life or a special role in some part of the life of a community. An oral history most often focuses on the community or on what someone remembers about a specific historical event, issue, time, or place (see Cándida Smith, Chapter 34, this volume). When an oral interview focuses on a person's entire life, it is usually referred to as a life story or life history.

A life story can take a factual form, a metaphorical form, a poetic form, or any other creatively expressive form. What is important is that the life story be told in the form, shape, and style that is most comfortable to the person telling it. Whatever form

it takes, a life story always brings order and meaning to the life being told, for both the teller and the listener. It is a way to understand the past and the present more fully, and a way to leave a personal legacy for the future.

A life story is a fairly complete narrative of an individual's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects. A life story gives us a vantage point from which to see how one person experiences and understands life, his or her own especially, over time. It enables us to see and identify threads and links that connect one part of a person's life to another, that connect childhood to adulthood.

Life stories are told on many occasions. We are in fact continually telling others who we are and what we are about. Through the daily chores of life, and at every stage of life, we share pieces of ourselves with those we come in contact with. Whether it is the solitary, social, or dramatic play of childhood, a rite of passage of adolescence, a wedding, or a retirement banquet, we are continually telling episodes and chapters of our life stories, both as we live them and as we relive them in our everyday actions, behaviors, creations, and the words we speak about them.

We keep memories, experiences, and collective values alive by telling others about them or putting them in a form that may last longer than ourselves. In a life story interview, the interviewee is a storyteller, the narrator of the story of his or her own life; the interviewer is a guide, or director, in this process. The two together are collaborators, composing and constructing a story the teller can be pleased with.

As collaborator in an open-ended process, the researcher/guide is never really in control of the story actually told. The process may not always go as smoothly as hoped. The person asked to tell his or her story may be brief, unembellishing, and unemotional in the telling. This could result in a short listing of factual events that have occurred. In some cases there may be more

that can be done to help a storyteller to develop a more fully told, feeling-based story; in other cases a recitation of facts may be all an interviewer will be able to get.

At other times, the teller may present a conjured, fabricated, or strategic story. If this happens, the interviewer need not run out for a lie detector; it may be that this type of story will also serve his or her research interests. The researcher could ask, and include some interpretation about, why the individual chose a fabricated story—that is, what purpose this served for the storyteller.

A researcher may also use corroborators, or seek indicators of internal consistency. It may be that the researcher can use whatever story an interviewee tells to accomplish the research goals, finding an interpretation that will be useful. The point of the life story interview is to give the person interviewed the opportunity to tell his or her story in the way that person chooses to tell it. Coherence and honesty can be part of the collaborative process, if necessary, but achieving this will depend on how open the storyteller is to coherence and honesty in the first place.

♦ *Benefits and Uses of the Life Story Interview*

It is impossible to anticipate what a life story interview will be like—not so much the form it will take, but the power of the experience itself. I have found this to be the case over and over, as have my students, who have reported how meaningful it has been for them to have done particular interviews, especially those with individuals they were already close to, such as parents or spouses. Just witnessing—really hearing, understanding, and accepting, without judgment—another's life story can be transforming (Birren and Birren 1996).

PERSONAL BENEFITS

A woman who had just completed a life story interview with her father said, "There was no way I could have prepared for the emotional impact this experience had on me." She was completely overwhelmed by what she had learned about her father and later described having a great deal of "emotional residue" from that experience with him. After I read her father's life story, with all of the details of his having been raised during the Depression by a single mother as one of four children in poverty and with constant uprooting, of having witnessed the frontline horrors of World War II, and of struggling to enter the postwar working world with a grade school education, I thought I knew what she meant.

Another woman interviewed her father and had a similar experience. She later wrote:

Sitting with my father for three hours listening to his life story was a wonderful experience for both of us. Our relationship has not been one of sharing feelings and innermost thoughts. I've always felt that he loves me, although he has seldom shown his love through words or behavior. What started out to be a slightly uncomfortable experience for both of us ended up being a very special time. It was like we had both been lifted out of our worlds and placed in this room together. Of course, I would have liked to hear more about how he felt about different life events, but I know that he shared more with me that day than he had in my entire lifetime. At the end of our three hours together we hugged each other. I told him that I loved him and was glad he was my father. He told me that he loved me and was glad that I was his daughter. Our eyes both filled up and then this special time ended, although the effects of this time together will stay with us. That door within him that was slammed shut

when he was thirteen years old opened up a crack, and I was allowed to peek in and see my father from the inside out—and I am thankful for this.

There may be no equal to the life story interview for revealing the inner life of a person. Historical reconstruction may not be the primary concern in life stories; rather, it may be how the individuals see themselves at given points in their lives, and how they want others to see them. Life stories offer glimpses of the sometimes hidden human qualities and characteristics that make us all so fascinating, *and* fun to listen to.

I have found that the vast majority of people really want to share their life stories. All that most people usually need is someone to listen, or someone to show a sincere interest in their stories, and they welcome being interviewed. Even those who may be reluctant to be interviewed because they feel intimidated, embarrassed, ashamed, or simply unsure about it or uncomfortable with it (see Adler and Adler, Chapter 25, this volume) may be persuaded by the many valuable personal benefits that can come with sharing their life stories, if they can overcome their unwillingness:

1. In sharing our stories, we gain a clearer perspective on personal experiences and feelings, which in turn brings greater meaning to our lives.
2. Through sharing our stories, we obtain greater self-knowledge, stronger self-image, and enhanced self-esteem.
3. In sharing our stories, we share cherished experiences and insights with others.
4. Sharing our stories can bring us joy, satisfaction, and inner peace.
5. Sharing our stories is a way of purging, or releasing, certain burdens and validating personal experience; this is in fact central to the recovery process.

6. Sharing our stories helps create community, and may show us that we have more in common with others than we thought.
7. By sharing our stories, we can help other people see their lives more clearly or differently, and perhaps inspire them to change negative things in their lives.
8. When we share our stories, others will get to know and understand us better, in ways that they hadn't before.
9. In sharing our stories, we might gain a better sense of how we want our stories to end, or how we can give ourselves the "good" endings we want. By understanding our past and present, we derive a clearer perspective on our goals for the future.

Not everyone will experience the life story interview exactly in the same way, of course. Some may look back on certain parts of their lives with regret, and for some the interview can be a painful process. But even this kind of reaction can have eventual positive outcomes.

RESEARCH USES

The life story interview is inherently interdisciplinary; its many research uses directly parallel the four classic functions of sacred stories. The life story interview can help the teller, the listener, the reader, and the scholar to understand a broad range of psychological, sociological, mystical-religious, and cosmological-philosophical issues.

As for psychological uses, the remembering, shaping, and sharing of a life story can be a valuable text for learning about the human endeavor. There are many domains within psychology where the life story can be a helpful research tool. The life story narrative may be the most effective means for gaining an understanding of how the self evolves over time. Through an exami-

nation of the self-narrative process, the researcher can secure useful information and come to the desired understanding of the self as a meaning maker with a place in society, the culture, and history (Freeman 1992). Telling a life story can be one of the most emphatic ways to answer the question, "Who am I?" The researcher can determine if the story tells who the person really is, if there is a felt unity of experiences in the story told, how identity is defined, whether this is internally and externally consistent, and how these match with identity-formation models (Widdershoven 1993; Kroger 1993; Erikson 1963; Marcia 1966).

Telling a life story is not therapy, but the act of telling the story can often help clarify things for the teller that he or she might not have understood before, as noted earlier. After all, psychotherapy is known as the "talking cure." In therapy, individuals tell their stories to professionals who are trained to help them understand, interpret, and learn from their stories better than they could on their own. The narrative approach, when used by therapists or counselors as a guided means for assisting clients to get to the details of their lives, is a process of "storying" and/or "restorying" (White & Epston 1990), or creating new and possibly liberating narratives (see Miller, de Shazer, and De Jong, Chapter 19, this volume).

The life story interview is also one of the most helpful psychological research approaches available to enable researchers to gain a subjective perspective on and understanding of the broad scope of topics or issues that individuals experience. In telling their life stories, individuals follow a natural tendency of arranging the events and circumstances of their lives in ways that give those events a coherent order (Cohler 1988). The book series *The Narrative Study of Lives*, which explores questions of how we construct and make sense of our lives through narrative, is essential reading for any researcher using life stories (Josselson

and Lieblich 1993, 1995, 1999; Lieblich and Josselson 1994, 1997; Josselson 1996).

The results of life story interviews also have sociological uses. Life stories can help the researcher become more aware of the range of possible roles and standards that exist within a human community. They can define an individual's place in the social order of things and can explain or confirm experience through the moral, ethical, or social context of a given situation. They can provide the researcher with information about a social reality existing outside the story that is described by the story (Bertaux 1981). They also can help explain the story itself as a social construct (Rosenthal 1993) as well as help explain an individual's understanding of social events, movements, and political causes, or how individual members of a group, generation, or cohort see certain events or movements (Stewart 1994).

The stories people tell about their lives all contain discourse units, degrees of coherence, and an overall linguistic structure. All of these are useful to researchers interested in determining the relation between language and social practice, the relation of self to others, and the creation of social identity (Linde 1993; Mkhonza 1995).

Regarding mystical-religious issues, life stories can provide clues to what people's greatest struggles and triumphs are, where their deepest values lie, what their quests have been, where they might have been broken, and where they have been made whole again. Life stories portray religion and spirituality as lived experience. Researchers can ask specific questions of a story, such as, What beliefs, or worldview, are expressed in the story? Is the transcendent expressed? In what way does community play a role in the life lived deeply? How does this spiritual autobiography compare to the lives of the classic spiritual leaders (Comstock 1995)?

Addressing questions of beliefs, values, customs, sacred traditions, and meaning in

life, anthropologists regularly use life stories to get at shared cultural meanings, the insider's view of a community, and the dynamics of cultural change (Geertz 1973; Langness & Frank 1981). Folklorists know that life stories are the repositories of traditional lore, beliefs, customs, and practices, and that they can answer many questions about the process of keeping traditions alive (Titon 1980; Ives 1986).

As far as cosmological-philosophical issues are concerned, it is very likely that each life story will contain a personal worldview, a personal philosophy, a personal value system, and a personal ideology, as well as views on what is morally, if not politically, correct, how life is to be lived, and so on. Researchers could explore how life stories told currently fit with what we know of the universe today, or how people make sense of the world we now live in, or the "thickness" of connections across time, or the personal vision or interpretation of what life and reality is about for the person (Brockelman 1985).

The research applications of the life story interview are limitless. In any field, the life story itself could serve as the centerpiece for published research, or segments could be used as data to illustrate any number of research needs. The life story interview allows for the gathering of more data than a researcher may actually use, which is good practice and provides a broad foundation of information to draw upon. The life story approach can be used within the disciplines already mentioned, as well as for the examination of many substantive issues, as the following few examples illustrate.

Narratives are being given a central place in the search for fresh approaches to knowing and teaching. The life stories of educators can tell researchers how those individuals have found their own centers through their chosen work; they can illustrate the primacy, in both individual lives and educational practice, of the quest for life's meaning and the role of caring for persons (Witherell and Noddings 1991).

Life stories are central to human development, interactions between generations, and integrity in late life. It is now commonly recognized in gerontology that a primary developmental task for elders is the "life review" (Butler 1963). This is, in effect, the process of remembering and expressing the experiences, struggles, lessons, and wisdom of a lifetime, which can be of great value to the researcher. It was the role of elders to pass on their values and wisdom through their stories long before Robert Butler (1963) described the life review process and referred to it as the "elder function."

When the life review is purposeful and not a passive, fragmentary flickering of images from the past, the result can be transforming. Telling a life story, at any age, with much reflection, can help a person to clarify his or her "ultimate concerns" before it is too late (Tillich 1957; Erikson 1964). The life stories of elders can provide researchers with much significant information about the life course, the sequence of generations, our understanding of aging, and the role of stories across the life cycle, and can help us to determine ways to improve the quality of life (Birren et al. 1996).

To balance out the databases researchers have relied upon for so long in generating theory, more life stories of women and members of culturally diverse groups need to be recorded. We need to give the feminine voice more opportunities to be heard, analyzed, and theorized about, at least to see if there might be a female equivalent to the monomyth (Campbell 1968), so that researchers will be able to determine more effectively the similarities and differences between the male and female experience, and to seek a synthesis that would expand life story options for all and benefit both genders (Gergen and Gergen 1993). There is a wide range of uses and applications of narrative knowing in relation to gender issues (see especially Helle 1991; Lieblich and Josselson 1994). For similar reasons, because how we tell our stories is mediated by our cultures (Josselson 1995), we need to

hear the life stories of individuals from underrepresented groups, to help establish a balance in the literature and expand the options for us all on the cultural level. Life stories of gay men and lesbians would also contribute to a more complete understanding of the issues related to change in people's lives (Boxer and Cohler 1989; Ben-Ari 1995).

◆ *The Art and Science of Life Story Interviewing*

Although a fairly uniform research methodology can be applied and many important data can be gathered from a life story, there may be more subjectivity, even chance, involved in doing a life story interview than common standards of objectivity would lead one to expect. The same researcher may use different questions with different interviewees, based on a number of variables, and still end up with a fairly complete life story of each person being interviewed. Different interviewers may also use different questions, depending on the particular foci of their projects. The life story interview is essentially a template that will be applied differently in different situations, circumstances, and settings.

For example, in *The Life Story Interview* (Atkinson 1998), I suggest more than 200 questions an interviewer can ask in obtaining a life story. These questions are not meant to be used in their entirety or as a structure that is in any way set in stone. They are merely suggested questions, and only the most appropriate few need be used for each person interviewed. There are times when a researcher might use a handful of these questions and other times when he or she might ask two or three dozen of them. From case to case, it is very likely that an interviewer will choose different sets of questions. The key to getting the best interview is for the interviewer to be flexible and able to adapt to specific circumstances.

There may be cases in which an interviewer will ask questions that are not on the list of those offered at all, when someone's life experience is best expressed or understood in an entirely different context than the standard domains of life.

In my view, the life story interview can be *approached* scientifically, but it is best *carried out* as an art. Although there may be a structure (a set of questions, or parts thereof) that can be used, each interviewer will apply this in his or her own way. Although theories may come into play to a varying degree throughout the process, the interview and the interpretation of it are highly subjective. Further, just as there are good and better artists, there are good and better interviewers. The execution of the interview, whether structured or not, will vary from one interviewer to another. The particular interviewee is another important factor. Life storytellers offer highly personal meanings, memories, and interpretations of their own, adding to the artful contours of their life stories.

Because life story interviewing itself is primarily an artful endeavor, the resulting interviews should be *interpreted* as an art form. The life story interview has its own standards of reliability and validity that are distinct from quantitative research methods. Qualitative research (including life story interviews) can be determined to be reliable or valid on its own merits. As works of art have their own standards of judgment, so too do research methods based primarily on subjectivity, flexibility, and inevitable human variables. A life story is first and foremost a text, to be read, understood, and interpreted on its own merit and in its own way.

THE PROCESS OF LIFE STORY INTERVIEWING

A life story interview unfolds in three stages. First is the planning or preinterview stage, which includes preparing for the interview and, especially, understanding why

and how a life story can be beneficial. Second is the process of doing the interview itself, guiding a person through the telling of his or her life story while recording it on audio- or videotape. Third are the processes of transcribing and interpreting the interview material.

Because my own orientation is to the person telling the story, my inclination in transcribing narrative material is to leave the interviewer's questions and comments, as well as repetitions, out of the transcript, so that it becomes a flowing, connected narrative in the respondent's own words. I might then give the transcribed life story to the person to review and check over for any changes he or she might want to make in it, thus responding to the life story in the form of a subjective reaction or validity check. Still, the broader question of what to transcribe remains debatable, an issue I will return to in the next section.

What we end up with is a flowing life story in the words of the person telling it. The only editing necessary would be to delete repetitions or other completely extraneous information. It may be that some reordering of content will add to the clarity or readability of the story. If one does such reordering, the greatest advantage to the life story approach comes into play, which is that one can still consult the person whose story it is and give him or her the final say in what the life story will look like in its completed form, given that it is that person's story that is being told. The life storyteller can also address the internal consistency issue; that is, does the way things seem to be connected in narrative form make sense to him or her? The person telling the life story should always have the last word in how his or her story is presented in written form before it gets passed on to others or is published.

Life story interviews can vary considerably in length. Sometimes restrictive circumstances prevail and an interview may be limited to an hour or less. This is far from the ideal. For example, I have had to conduct a few life story interviews under

such conditions, when interviewees were away from home and had other obligations at the time. In each case I had to revise my usual approach and carry out the interview looking primarily for the essence, or highlights, of the person's life, still trying to have the person include something from each stage of life. In such circumstances, a researcher may be able to get more in-depth life stories by sending transcripts of the interviews to the persons to see if they want to add anything. Usually such additions can be done by mail, if there is a problem of distance, but this again is not ideal; face-to-face involvement is always preferred.

More typical of the kind of life story interviewing being described here is a series of at least two or three interviews with the person, each an hour to an hour and a half in duration. Even this may be considered brief, but it is quite a bit longer than the one-time interview, and much can be learned about a person's life in a two- or three-part interview that extends over three hours. This is the length of interview I recommend for students especially, as it provides them with more than enough information to gain a good understanding of whatever they are seeking for purposes of a course. With the transcription time involved, it is also about all they can manage within the time constraints of a course.

Some life story interviews can go on for two or three dozen hours. Interviews of this length are typical of full-length assisted autobiography. I have done a life story interview of more than 40 hours for the purpose of writing an assisted autobiography with Babatunde Olatunji, the African drummer. The interviews took place over a three-year period, as we were able to fit our meetings into our respective schedules and to allow time for transcriptions and going over each section or chapter. Other longer life histories, such as Carl Klockars's (1974) study of a professional fence, can require closer to 100 hours. An average-length life story interview, however, is more in the range of three to five hours, consisting of many sittings.

◆ *Issues and Challenges*

The life story interview is a highly contextualized, highly personalized approach to the gathering of qualitative information about the human experience. It demands many spontaneous, individual judgments on the part of the interviewer while the interview is in progress. Its direction can be determined on the spur of the moment by unexpected responses to questions, or by the way a life is given its particular narrative structure. The quest in a life story interview is for the unique voice and experience of the storyteller, which is morally implicative and may also merge at some points with the universal human experience. As such, a number of important related issues need to be considered.

ETHICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Because those of us who conduct life story interviews are asking real people to tell us their true stories, and because we are attempting to assist and collaborate with them in this process and then take their stories to a larger audience, we have to ask ourselves and be able to answer satisfactorily several questions concerning ethical issues, including the following: How can we reconcile the benefits of the life story to our interviewees with the benefits to our research agenda? How do we make sure that we maintain consistency between our original intention and the final product, and that this is clear all the way through? These are not easy questions to answer, especially if we ask people for their stories and then write only *about* them, not using their own words to tell their stories (Josselson 1996). The issue centers on the uneasy relationship between the personal and the research relevance of life stories, especially as story details are likely to be taken beyond the purview of the respondents.

This leads to an important conceptual issue, that of voice. If you ask someone to tell his or her life story, will what you get be in that person's authentic voice, or in a voice that he or she thinks you might be looking for? The type or quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee may have something to do with what you get. A relationship in which a power differential is part of the equation may or may not affect the voice the story is told in. If the power factor puts the interviewee in a vulnerable position, that could affect not only the voice the story is told in, but the impact telling it has on the one doing the telling (see Briggs, Chapter 44, this volume). If the respondent has found his or her own voice, knows what it is, and is used to using that voice, it is hard to imagine that a certain changeable circumstance would alter or influence the voice that person uses to tell his or her story. My own experience shows that people tend to want to tell their stories the way they happened, in their own voices as best they know how, regardless of who is asking what questions. A related issue here is consistency. If people are *aware* of, and accept, their own stories, those are the ones they would normally want to tell anyone.

A related conceptual issue is clarity. Life stories can be extremely complex. Life story interviews can help people organize, synthesize, and present the events, circumstances, and perceptions of their lives. This raises the following questions: Do interviewees see themselves clearly or vaguely? Do their stories tell us who they see themselves as? Do their words, tone, mood, or style tell us anything about them? Do their own meanings come across clearly in their stories? Do their stories tell us why as well as what?

These questions illustrate the threefold complexity of every life story. First is the story's content, which relates to the "Who am I?" question, or what happened to make me who I am. Second is the story's construct, which answers the "How am I?" question, or how the story is told. And third is the story's meaning, which answers the

"Why am I?" question, or what those things mean to me (de Vries & Lehman 1996). Each life story is complex in its own way, and each tells us something about the patterns, perceptions, and processes that contribute to our understanding of lives across time.

INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

This brings us to the interpretation of the life story. There are two steps in the postinterview stage of life story interviewing: transcription and interpretation. This is the point at which the researcher applies the interview itself, or the information gained from it, effectively and efficiently to achieve his or her original research goals. The ultimate aim of the narrative investigation of human life, which applies to life stories as well, is the interpretation of experience (Josselson and Lieblich 1995). This is a complex matter because both *interpretation* and *experience* are highly relative terms. Subjectivity is at the center of the process of life storytelling. This involves reaching for meaning through interpretation, as contrasted with experimental scientific approaches that aim for one-to-one correspondence between experience and its representation (Geertz 1973).

Transcription can be an interpretive issue in its own right when different methods are applied in making the information on interview tapes useful (see Poland, Chapter 30, this volume). Researchers in some oral history projects make final transcripts from the tapes, whereas others make only bare outlines; still others develop complete catalogs from the tapes and encourage individual researchers to listen to the tapes and make their own transcripts. The purpose of such partial secondary documents is essentially to facilitate finding material on the tapes (Ives 1974).

The approach taken at the Center for the Study of Lives, because its purpose is to tell the life stories of the people being interviewed in their own words, is to make com-

plete transcripts of everything that interviewees say about their lives on the tapes. The primary goal in transcription is to ensure accuracy of meaning, to capture the meaning conveyed in the words used by the storyteller, thus the less editing, the better. Of course, the final transcript depends upon the research goal. If the researcher's purpose is linguistic, then it would be important to keep language usage, dialect, pauses, and other verbal idiosyncrasies intact in the transcript. Because the aim of the Center for the Study of Lives is to end up with flowing narratives in the words of the persons telling the stories, with their intended meanings as clearly specified as possible, the interviewers' questions and comments are left out of transcriptions; only the interviewees' words appear, put into sentence and paragraph form. The transcriptions may note significant emphases, actions, or sounds in brackets or as part of explanatory prefaces. Relistening to a tape while reading its transcript can also be interpretive, because the closer one can get to the text itself, the closer one is to its meaning.

Even though no interview can be perfectly controlled, just as no measuring instrument can be perfectly calibrated, there are still certain ways of determining how reliable and how valid a life story is. Reliability has to do with the extent to which questioning will yield the same answers whenever and wherever it is carried out. Validity is the extent to which inquiry yields the "correct" answers; this refers to the quality of fit between information received or observed and that expected (Kirk and Miller 1986; Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

It is not necessary to try to interpret a life story interview against quantitative standards of analysis. Categories of analysis will emerge from a review of each life story text itself, along with a complexity of patterns and meanings, rather than being set from the beginning as in quantitative studies (McCracken 1988). The researcher's objective is to have the storyteller elaborate, with feeling, upon what has happened in

his or her life; thus the researcher is seeking the "insider's" viewpoint on the life being lived. A fundamental interpretive guideline is that the storyteller should be considered both the expert and the authority on his or her own life. This is based on the belief that the storyteller knows the story being told and will give a truthful and thorough representation of that story. This demands a standard of reliability and validity that is appropriate to the life story interview as a subjective reflection of the experience in question.

A life story interview is a highly personal encounter; an analysis of a life story is highly subjective. There are a multiplicity of perspectives possible, and the narratives arrived at by different interviewers will be representative of their own positions, just as a portrait painted from the side or from the front is still a faithful portrait (Frank 1980; Runyan 1982). A personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of everything, or even what actually happened in the person's life (Riessman 1993). Historical truth is not the main issue in narrative; telling a story implies a certain, maybe unique, point of view. It is more important that the life story be deemed "trustworthy" than that it be "true." We are seeking the subjective reality, after all.

One of the most important measures here is internal consistency, but this also needs to be understood subjectively. According to Bert Cohler (1982), the way an individual recounts a personal narrative at any point in his or her life represents the most internally consistent interpretation of the way that person currently understands the past, the experienced present, and the anticipated future. This means that what a life storyteller says in one part of the narrative should not contradict what he or she says in another part. There *are* inconsistencies in life, and people may react to things one way at one time and different ways at others, but their stories of what happened and what they did should be consistent within themselves. Internal consistency is a primary quality check that can be used by

both the interviewer and the storyteller to square or clarify earlier comments with recent insights if they appear to be different (McCracken 1988).

External consistency—where what the storyteller says conforms to what one may already know, or think one knows, about the person telling the story—is not always going to be a valid measure, either, because the life story interview does not necessarily seek historical truth, only the storyteller's version of or perspective on what he or she remembers happened. The narrative approach to the study of lives places emphasis upon internal coherence as experienced by the person, rather than external criteria of truth or validity.

Corroboration and persuasion are two other control measures of the validity of a life story interview. Subjective corroboration comes into play when the transcribed, edited life story is given to the storyteller to review. Does the person confirm or support what he or she said originally? External corroboration would be achieved if, upon reading the life story, a close relative of the storyteller, or someone else who is familiar with as much of that person's life as possible, confirms what was said as well. Persuasion is an objective measure of whether the life story seems reasonable and convincing to others. Does the story, or any part of it, strike a resonant chord with us, based on our own experience? If the experiences and events recounted are not familiar to us, does it seem possible or plausible that they could have happened to someone else (Riessman 1993)? Another aspect of persuasion is how a story involves us: Does the story compel, stimulate, delight, or invite us in any way (Gergen 1985)? This may be more a matter of storytelling ability than of truth telling, and the former is as much a criterion of validity as is the latter in life storytelling.

The standard being put forth here is that the life storyteller has the final say in telling the story, even after it has been transcribed, because he or she is the one telling the story in the first place and is the one to determine

how it all fits together, what sense it makes, and whether or not it is a valid story. The storyteller is the one who determines what gets told and whether something stays the same or is changed.

The question of meaning is vital to both the storyteller and the researcher. Life storytelling is a process of creating and re-creating a life. Each time a life story is told, the person telling it can find new or additional meaning. The key to meaning making through life storytelling, for the one telling the story, is reflective thinking. If this is not happening, more work may be required for meaning making to take place. To help a life storyteller to be reflective, to encourage him or her pull out the story's inherent meaning, the interviewer can ask direct questions aimed at discovering the meaning, especially the emotional, level of the story.

Whether life stories are used as a source of psychological or social science research material, as a source of historical material for family and community, as a means of promoting personal insight, or for any other disciplinary inquiry, interpretations of life stories—the meaning-making process—are usually of two kinds: those that are founded upon a theoretical basis and those that emerge from a personal frame of reference.

There are numerous discipline-based theories that can be used with life stories (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000a; Kenyon and Randall 1997). In my view, however, a theory should be applied to a life story only when and if it fits the story well—if the theory actually emerges out of the story itself. One quick example: In interpreting the life story of a 60-year-old man who emphasizes the importance of his relationship with his children and grandchildren, a researcher might want to make reference to Erikson's (1963, 1980) theory of human development, in which the stage of middle adulthood has as its core conflict "generativity versus stagnation."

Personal interpretations of life stories can be very important. The researcher's

own personal frame of reference can be appropriate, as well. I would suggest three basic guidelines in this regard. First, the researcher should not judge, but, rather, make connections. Rather than assuming a stance “over and against” the person telling the story, analyzing, limiting, or classifying the storyteller in some way, the researcher should seek to find the personal relevance of the story. Second, a life story is a text like any other document or story in any other field. It can stand on its own, because it automatically and immediately evokes certain personal, subjective responses based on the experiences it describes or the perspective of the reader. Third, we are all each other’s teachers. Like a novel or a poem, a life story has something to say to us about life. We often learn from the stories we hear or read. These are all reasons researchers need to take a personal, consider-one-life-at-a-time approach to interpreting life stories.

THE SCALE OF TRUTHFULNESS

As many disciplines take the narrative turn toward story and away from the immutable laws of nature, historians, social scientists, philosophers, and legal scholars have begun to celebrate the particularity and localism inherent in the medium of “the little story” (Arras 1997). This has created considerable differences of opinion about the use, value, and meaning of personal narratives.

Perhaps the most important question to ask here is, Is there a connection between the story being told and “the truth” being sought? One view is that the stories that convey the subjective quest of the person, even though they might be “evasive,” “are their own truth” (Frank 1995). Another view is that each of us shades the truth or even intentionally distorts crucial facts in the stories we tell about our own lives (Arras 1997). My view, from my own experience with life story interviews, is that both of these perspectives can be accurate.

Truthfulness is a matter of scale. For example, the truths of “the little story” may be valid but perhaps questionable in relation to larger social questions, such as the typicality of a particular respondent’s story in relation to others of similar backgrounds. It all depends on the interpretive context in question.

B. B. King, the great blues singer, has self-consciously addressed these views. In his autobiography *Blues All around Me*, he acknowledges:

When it comes to my own life, others may know the cold facts better than me. Scholars have told me to my face that I’m mixed up. I smile but don’t argue. Truth is, cold facts don’t tell the whole story. Reading this, some may accuse me of remembering wrong. That’s okay, because I’m not writing a cold-blooded history. I’m writing a memory of my heart. That’s the truth I’m after—following my feelings, no matter where they lead. (King and Ritz 1996:2)

King wants to understand himself, so he remembers the best he can, and tells a story of the heart. This may be all we can ask of a person telling his own story without the aid of a photographic memory. This may be the best we can expect. But it still leaves us with the dilemma of not knowing whether it is King’s actual experience or an experience of the heart that he tells about.

There are scales of validity for all life stories, all autobiographies, all interviews. People cannot be, and don’t need to be, under oath when telling their life stories. Realistically, life story interviewers should remember that it is possible that what they are getting from those they interview is not the whole truth. They can be pretty sure, however, that what they are getting are the stories respondents want to tell. That in itself tells us a good deal about what we really want to know. As Arras (1997) points out, “We ought to favor such narratives, first, because we can’t do any better.”

◆ Conclusion

Whether they are gathered for research purposes on particular topics or questions or to learn more about human lives and societies from different individuals' perspectives, life stories serve as excellent means for understanding how people see their own experiences, their own lives, and their interactions with others. Researchers who employ the approach to the life story interview suggested here may avoid many typical research and publication dilemmas if they keep certain primary "values" in mind. If one sets out with clear intent to help people tell their stories in their own words, the results will be clear as well.

The essences of life stories told seriously and consciously, in the voices of the persons

telling them, are timeless; settings and circumstances change, but motifs and the meanings they represent remain constant across lives and time. Life stories make connections, shed light on the possible paths through life, and, maybe most important, lead us to the human spirit, to our deepest feelings, the values we live by, and the eternal meaning of life.

More life stories need to be brought forth that respect and honor the personal meanings life storytellers give to their stories. We share our stories for the bond of understanding that is established between us through the telling. In this regard, there is an exciting future for life stories and the narrative study of lives. The more we share our own stories, the closer we all become.

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