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Introduction

Setting the Scene

The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embedded in real people and in a real context. (E.P. Thompson, 1980: 8)

From the outside looking in, an observer might see a 'common' condition: a son is killed in Vietnam, a daughter's mind is destroyed by LSD, a woman is divorced, a man becomes subject to mandatory requirement, there is a divorce. Yet, in interior life, what happens to one is unique. Life histories, like snowflakes, are never of the same design … (Audrey Borenstein, 1978: 30)

Overview

In this chapter:

- **We explain the relevance of the book and introduce the biographical turn.**
- **We introducing ourselves.**
- **We identify who the book is for and what we seek to achieve.**
- **An outline of the chapters and structure of the book is provided.**

Why did we write this book and who is it for? The answer to these questions lies in our belief, based on extensive experience of doing biographical research, that such methods offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other. We use the word 'dynamic' to convey the idea of human beings as active agents in making their lives rather than being simply determined by historical and social forces. Such an idea – with immense implications for the way we think about research – has, from time to time, been lost or margin-alised in social science. Yet it has recently found renewed impetus, and if we think of people – like you and us – as actively experiencing, giving meaning to and cre-ating their worlds, we need to know more about how this happens, now it is under-stood by those concerned, and now it can be made most sense of.

We think this is an opportune time to produce such a book: we are all, it seems, biographers now and want to tell our stories. The genre is pervasive throughout our culture. A glance in most bookshops will reveal the extent to which biography and autobiography serve as prime vehicles for self and social exploration, or maybe self promotion. This is an age of biography, and telling stories seems ubiquitous in popular culture: we consume the stories of celebrities, are fascinated by stories on reality TV,

and are constantly intrigued by wartime narratives, as witnessed by various series being repeated on television (Goodley et al., 2004). Gossip and celebrity magazines, fun-based websites, podcasts, blogs, biopics (film), biodramas (theatre), are all sites for biographical expression and experiment, by ordinary people as well as celebrities. New biographies of celebrities appear, it seems, almost daily. Jerry Springer, the American chat show host, is using television to explore his own story and family history – including of grandmothers murdered in the Holocaust – as part of wrestling with questions of identity. Oprah Winfrey has helped create an intimate confessional as well as controversial form of media communication, which, among other things, is said to have allowed gays, transsexuals and transgender people to tell their stories. We are all, as stated, biographers now or encouraged to be so.

Very serious writers are using a biographical approach in diverse, even surprising contexts. The universe, for example, has a recent biography, as have a number of cities (Ackroyd, 2000; Gribbin, 2007). Peter Ackroyd has employed the biographical form to weave greater understanding and connections between apparently disparate aspects of London's history. The genre allows him, he says, to do this: 'if the history of London poverty is beside a history of London madness, then the connections may provide more significant information than any orthodox historiographical survey' (Ackroyd, 2000: 2). Connecting disparate social phenomena and personal experience and weaving understanding between them in new and sometimes surprising ways characterises, as we will illustrate, a great deal of biographical research.

Biographical methods have claimed an increasing place in academic research and are alive and well (if sometimes marginal and contested) in various academic disciplines such as literature, history, sociology, anthropology, social policy and education, as well as in feminist and minority studies (Smith, 1998). There is a mushrooming of PhD and Masters programmes, dedicated research centres and conferences which, in various ways, are concerned with researching lives and the stories people tell about them. The words used to describe such methods can vary – autobiography, auto-ethnography, personal history, oral history or life story, as well as narrative, for instance – yet as Norman Denzin (1989a) has observed, there are many similarities (if also differences of emphasis). There can, for instance, be shared interest in the changing experiences and viewpoints of people in their daily lives, what they consider important, and how to make sense of what they say about their pasts, presents and futures, and the meanings they give to these in the stories they tell. There can be sensitivity towards the uniqueness yet also the similarities of lives and stories, like the snowflakes referred to above. Biography enables us to discern patterns but also distinctiveness in lives. The relationship between the particular and general, uniqueness and commonality, is in fact a central issue in biographical research.

The pervasive interest in biography may be understood by reference to living in a postmodern culture in which intergenerational continuities have weakened and a new politics of identity and representation has emerged among diverse groups. Women and men, gay and lesbian, black and white, young and old, may increasingly seek to live lives in different ways from parents or grandparents and doing biographical work has been one means to this end. The self and experience become

a sort of reflexive life project, a focus for reworking who we are, and communicating this to others and for challenging, perhaps, some of the dominant stories told about people like us in the wider culture. Such a phenomenon can also be understood by reference to profound economic and cultural change over the last few decades, including the rise of feminism. These processes have provided more opportunities for self-definition (in the interplay of the global and local via mass communication technologies and in the celebration of diverse lifestyles, for example). Yet this historical moment, as commentators like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have observed, seems riddled with paradox: new opportunities for self-definition co-exist with deep seated anxieties and existential doubt about our capacity to cope. The biographical imperative, at all levels, may be fuelled by the necessity to compose a life and make meaning in a more fragmented, individualised and unpredictable culture where inherited templates can be redundant and the nature of the life course increasingly uncertain in a globalising world.

A turn

There has, as indicated, been a major turn towards biographical, autobiographical, life history or narrative approaches in the academy over the last 30 or so years (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). The turn has many labels – the narrative or subjectivist turn – and encompasses different academic disciplines, including many of the social sciences. There are new journals devoted to the field and books have proliferated. In the United Kingdom, Miriam David, an Associate Director of the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Programme (which has sponsored a major study of 'learning lives', using biographical methods (Biesta et al., 2008)), has welcomed the increasing use of these approaches in the study of education, higher education and lifelong learning. They offer, she states, potentially important insights into the complexities of learning across the lifespan that currently dominant evidence-based approaches, with their preoccupation with what is most easily quantified and measured, often miss or neglect (David, 2008).

The turn, in conceptual terms, has been a response to a long standing omission or marginalisation of the human subject in research, under the banner of objectivity and generalisability, modelled on the natural sciences. The dominant story science has told itself – of objectivity, of the need to focus on the directly observable and of a methodological transcendence of the human condition in sense-making processes – came to be questioned to the core (Roberts, 2002). Social science was reconceptualised, for many, from the 1960s onwards (but echoing older themes), as a human practice, shaped by power, dominant interests and/or powerful myths, which required interrogation. The growth of feminism and oral history was especially influential in challenging the neglect of the human subject (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Plummer, 2001). Both were concerned to engage with personal accounts in a manner respecting and valuing what people had to say. They were also about finding some means to elicit and analyse the spoken and written records of people who, more often than not, had been neglected in the mainstream social and historical record. Feminism and oral history represented, at times, a radical, questioning edge, which

continues to shape the thinking and practice of many biographical researchers. Moreover, biographical researchers may frequently, if not exclusively, engage with marginalised peoples, seeking to give voice and to challenge dominant assumptions, as part of a humanist project to build a more just social order.

We should add that biographical methods, and the desire to place people and their humanity at the core of social research, are not new either. They reach back to Max Weber (a German sociologist who focused on people's actions rather than structures) and a need for understanding in social science – by reference to the people concerned – rather than observing and measuring behaviour without engaging in dialogue with those most intimately concerned. The emphasis on engaging with people, and with understanding how they make sense of their worlds, was similarly at the heart of what was called the Chicago School. This has a central place in the history of the biographical research 'family'. Chicago School sociologists and social psychologists, in the 1920s, developed the notion of symbolic interactionism to capture the dynamic, learned, malleable and constructed quality of human identity and society, not least through the medium of language. Symbolic interactionists treat the things that members of society do as being performed by them, as actors, rather than as if done by something called the system itself. The social order, in short, is dynamically created in, through and from the interactions of its members. The task for the researcher is how to chronicle such processes and to explain them theoretically: using a repertoire of psychological, sociological, historical, literary and narrative theories. Furthermore, symbolic interactionists believed that only particulars, and people, have real empirical substance. They saw grand theoretical abstractions – like class, progress or even love – as having no real solidity outside people, their lived experience and stories. The idea of grounding understanding in such experience and of using theory respectfully in its light, remains, for many, a core value in biographical research. Human beings – rather than overly abstract categories – are at the heart of the project.

The British social historian Edward Thompson made this point in his seminal study, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1980). 'Making' was central to his ontology, or theory of being. Class was not so much a structure, or even a category, but something that is made in (and can be shown to have happened in) human relationships. Class is embodied in real people in real contexts, as in our opening quotation: 'the finest meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love' (Thompson, 1980: 8). You cannot have love without lovers or have deference without squires and labourers. Class happens when some men and women, as a result of common experiences (shared, inherited and even imagined), feel and articulate – to which we would add reflexively 'learn' – some identity of interest in comparison to another group. How people actively 'learn' their world, and their place in it, as well as how this may be challenged, is at the heart of much biographical research.

Bringing us into the text

We want, at this early stage, to introduce ourselves and bring our work, lives and orientations directly into the book. The book, in a sense, seeks to combine notions

of biographical research as a personal journey with being a textbook of how to make good and meaningful research. The business of doing research is, we believe, made more alive in such an approach. Liz Stanley (1992) also draws attention – in her use of the term auto/biography (with a slash) – to the inter-relationship between the constructions of our own lives through autobiography and the construction of others' lives through biography. We cannot, in a sense, write stories of others without reflecting our own histories, social and cultural locations as well as subjectivities and values. Moreover, choosing a topic for a biographical study tends almost always to be rooted in our own personal and/or professional biographies (Miller, 2007). A topic we choose in others' lives may be motivated by or raise profound issues in our own. We, therefore, argue the case for bringing the researcher, and processes of relationship, into the research frame – and for interrogating this quite explicitly – rather than pretending, as many researchers do, that our interests and ways of making sense of others is, or should be, divorced from the people and experiences we are.

Barbara

Barbara's interest in using biographical approaches is rooted in her own life history. As a sociologist, Barbara writes, working in adult education, I am interested in researching the stories and experiences of adults who decide to return to learning later in their lives, in community, further or higher education. In particular I am interested in looking at marginalised groups of adult learners whose life histories have been shaped by inequalities of class, gender and race. The latter have been central concerns throughout my life. Being female and working class I soon became aware of class and later gender discrimination and inequalities in society through my own experiences and those of my family. Later as a teacher in a multicultural comprehensive school, I became very conscious of the pervasiveness of racism in society through the lives of the black pupils.

My life experiences of being female and working class drew me towards Marxist and feminist politics at the age of 17 in the early 1970s. Studying sociology at school and university enabled me to articulate, understand and politicise my life experiences. Like many young people at that time I was optimistic that the injustices of capitalism could be challenged and that through collective political action society could be changed. It was a belief in the importance of subjectivity in building agency and in overcoming the determinism of structural forces. This is probably one reason why, in relation to the biographical research I undertake, I am interested in the dynamic of structure and agency in people's lives.

However, despite my political awareness as an undergraduate student at the University of Warwick from 1973 until 1976 I felt overwhelmed by the middle-class culture and the privileged lives of the majority of its students, and the culture of the institution. This led to feelings of not always belonging – of being an outsider – despite enjoying my academic studies and having a circle of friends, as well as being involved in political groups. My confidence was occasionally undermined despite this political background and sociological knowledge.

My first experience of doing biographical research was in the mid-1980s when I was studying part-time for a Master of Philosophy degree in the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick, while also teaching at a school. The topic of my research was racism in schools and involved interviewing black pupils and getting them to talk about their life experiences. Looking back on my first encounters with life history interviews, my approach was not embedded in any particular theoretical underpinning. It was more about taking the plunge and engaging with people in what may have been a naive way. Luckily all the pupils were willing to talk and talk intimately about how racism affected their own and their family's daily lives. What struck me was how articulate they were in discussing personal and political issues of racism and what they felt about other pupils, teachers and the school. They illustrated how powerful biographical approaches could be in understanding everyday lives.

Later I made a career change from teaching 14–18 year olds to teaching adults at the University of Warwick. I entered academia feeling excited about the opportunity to undertake research but also experienced some trepidation. Echoing my earlier time as an undergraduate student, I was concerned about whether or not I would be good enough to work in the academic world. It was hinted to me that if I wanted to remain at Warwick I would need to obtain a PhD. My biography helped me to choose an area of study. I, therefore, became interested in how working-class adult students who had been out of the education system for a long time coped with the middle-class environment of a 'traditional', although relatively young university like Warwick. I reflected back on my pupils at the school where I had taught because many of them had been alienated by the middle-class and white school system and, as a result, left school having underachieved. Did the adult students at Warwick share similar life experiences? If so, why had they chosen to return to learn and why at this moment in their lives?

Here was my second encounter with using biographical approaches. However, this time I was part of a research team and environment. Although the focus was on mature women students I also interviewed male adult students to explore differences and similarities. The process confirmed my belief in the value of the life history in enabling the social science researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of social life as well as revealing how past lives impact upon the present. The stories were often painful but also filled with resilience in a determination to juggle lives and struggle on in order to get degrees. Such narratives illustrated how education could be empowering and change lives for the better.

Furthermore, my own biography was implicated in developing a particular orientation in research: employing life histories to examine collective experiences and possibilities for change in people's lives. My family life history also led me to be aware that in using biographical research we have to remember that there are stories which some people never tell or reveal only partially, because, perhaps, they are simply too painful or even traumatic.

My father had a story which he never really shared because of painful memories. The untold story affected the life of my family as a whole. My father was a British prisoner of war at Auschwitz III camp (Stalag III B) – the fact that there were such prisoners is not well known. Auschwitz III (Monowitz) was located near the IG

Farben chemical factory where British prisoners of war, alongside Jews and others, were used as forced labour in the factory. They were witnesses to many atrocities committed against Jews and others. The camp was the target for a bombing raid by the Americans. It was a Sunday, I subsequently discovered – their day off – and they were playing football. My father survived but friends were killed. He spoke a little about these events but not in detail: it was too painful. After my parents' deaths I found out more about his story by seeing a picture of him at Auschwitz in a British war veteran's magazine, as well as in documentary evidence in a letter from another British prisoner there. More recently I have found reference to him in a book about the experiences of British prisoners of war at Auschwitz. It refers to an episode, which I did not know about, whereby he and a friend attempted an escape during an air raid in 1944. I talked to his sister and visited Auschwitz with two friends. The site of Auschwitz III could not be visited at the time, nor was it easy to find out much detail about the camp, but I want to go back in the near future to complete an aspect of my life history. Biographies, and researching others' lives, can affect us in profound, interconnected ways.

Linden

My biography (Linden writes) has pain, puzzle and sadness too – like everyone's – and led me towards doing biographical research. This includes, professionally, a disenchantment and frustration with conventional research methods. I directed a study, in the mid-1980s, to examine the impact of second-chance educational programmes on the lives of adult learners. These programmes were designed to enable working-class people to return successfully to education. The research was mainly quantitative in design, using standard psychological instruments, which, on the face of it, were well tested for rigour and reliability. Structured into the design were diverse and well-tested procedures for asking the same questions in different ways. The particular instruments sought to measure changes in the locus of control (the extent to which people feel they may shape their own lives or whether these are determined by external forces), as well as in self-concept and health and well-being, over the period of the programmes.

Some of the 'instruments' (the language of psychological research can have the ring of the laboratory to it) were, in fact, resented by a number of students, especially some working-class women, towards the end of their programme. They felt empowered by the programmes and encouraged to question what academics did and said; they disliked feeling forced to tick particular boxes. `But it is not like that at all, it is more complicated', they would say (Lalljee et al., 1989). They could feel, they elaborated, empowered and more in control of their lives but also less in control at the same time. The locus of control, in certain regards, had shifted in positive ways – via access to a good and supportive group as well as feminist ideas – but this was only part of the picture. If they gained new insight into how a deeply gendered and classed culture could make them feel inadequate, and were empowered, in turn, to question what had been taken for granted, they also learned the pervasiveness of social and cultural inequalities with a corresponding sense of pessimism. Struggles to change a world seemed hard

and illusive. I wanted to find ways of researching more of this complexity and nuance of how people thought and felt, and in more collaborative ways.

In 1990, I moved from an administrative post in adult education to a university lectureship. The transition was traumatic, partly for personal and family reasons. I was uncertain about the new post and my own credentials for doing it. I wanted to write about adult education, to make sense of professional experience. But I was distracted as I spent unexpectedly large amounts of time developing a new Diploma and Masters degree in Continuing Education for people working with adult learners in different settings. The range of students on the Diploma was more diverse than anticipated, including nurse educators, police, counsellors, social workers and teachers in higher, further and adult education. Their needs were varied and I struggled to cope.

Students found some of the psychological literature remote from their experience and concerns. Particular academic conventions compounded the problem: a number of students wanted to understand and establish a more reflexive and even biographical focus to their work, but was this permissible, they asked, and could they use their own experiences in academic writing? Dare they even introduce the personal pronoun 'I' in written assignments or were they supposed to be more objective? These may appear naive questions now (although students still ask them) but I worried about the codes and conventions of academic writing and research. In fact I encouraged students to adopt a more experiential and autobiographical approach in their writing.

Some resolution of these tensions was found in becoming part of a community of biographical researchers. The literature on biographical research, and the writing of various colleagues, offered conceptual and methodological links between the personal and academic, the psychological and social, self and others. I also came to understand how I could relate burgeoning psychotherapeutic ideas – I was training as a psychotherapist at the time – to teaching, research and academic writing and learned that others were doing the same (West, 1996). If I was mad, there were others who were equally mad; moreover, I came to see psychotherapy itself as a form of biographical enquiry, a theme taken up later in the book.

The desire to connect social and psychological levels of explanation in the study of lives was profoundly rooted in my autobiography. I was one of a small number of working-class children going to Grammar School (for those who passed an exam at the age of 11: mostly middle-class children) from a public housing estate called Abbey Hulton on the edge of the industrial Potteries, in the English Midlands. I left close friends behind in negotiating, in effect, the contours of the English class system. Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's seminal study of education and the working class made use, in part, of the biographical approach in documenting the lives of working-class children struggling with issues of origin and destination, and of identity and where they really belonged (Jackson and Marsden, 1966). The book spoke to me, and still does, because this was my story too.

Yet making sense of my own experience required psychological insight alongside a sociological understanding of class and the workings of the educational system. Although my parents were working class, my mother's father had been a pottery

owner between the two wars although the business had collapsed in the Great Depression. Mother, as I now see it, resented the insecurity and social inferiority brought by a lost status and was affected by the immense emotional impact on my grandfather, who was never quite the same man. I came to realise how she invested energy into my education partly as compensation for her own frustrated ambition and loss, and that of her family. My relationship with my own father was equally complex. We grew apart as I got older and as I moved into adolescence we lost some of the intimacy of earlier times. An uncle moved in to live with us and my father felt squeezed out. I got caught up, later, in seeking the trappings of academic success – on behalf of my mother – and rejected part of my background and my Dad (who was from an ordinary working-class background) in the process. The Oedipal and social were deeply entwined.

Psychoanalytic psychotherapy gave me a way of thinking about biographies, combined with sociology, in writing my first book. Psychoanalysis places the making and meaning of subjectivity – as well as its contingency – at the core of its work. Subjectivity and selfhood are forged in the quality of our interactions with significant others and the extent to which these encourage a more or less open, more or less curious, engagement with experience. We may learn to become defensive about who we are and what we may desire, for fear of rejection. We may learn to tell stories that are partial and shaped by a need to appease powerful others. Such patterns can continue across a life and even find expression in research, as we may invest others, unconsciously – including researchers – with some of the characteristics of significant people in earlier periods of our lives (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; West, 1996). I came to realise that I was part of a growing movement to redraw the boundaries between personal experience and research, between psychological and sociological forms of understanding, in biographical enquiry. The present book is, in fact, born of the desire, for both of us, to develop this interdisciplinary project and conversation. Biographies, we argue, require an interdisciplinary spirit, which can give interpretation and understanding great richness and vitality.

There is something too, in my case, about becoming 60 in 2006, which added to the interdisciplinary impulse. Like Barbara I was thinking a great deal about my father's life and the period in which he lived. He was born in 1905 and was nine at the outbreak of the First World War. He was 34 when the Second World War began and badly injured in 1944. History matters. He volunteered to join the National Fire Service during the Blitz and a shard of glass cut though his helmet when a bomb hit a factory in Maidstone, Kent, in the south east of England. To understand my Dad required a sense of history, alongside sociology and psychology. Like many men of his time, Dad was uncomfortable with intimacy, shaped as he was by social class and dominant constructions of masculinity. When I first went to university, he came to visit me and gave me a hamper of sausages, bacon and fruit. He did not mention the shortages during the war and how precious such food had been; and he would have been uncomfortable in exploring the symbolic meaning of the gesture in 1965. Dad said little about many things and meaning was more implicit. Yet his gesture was pregnant with historical, sociological, psychological and relational significance.

A question of terms and cross cultural perspectives

We need to make clear that our use of the term biographical method denotes research which utilises individual stories or other personal documents to understand lives within a social, psychological and/or historical frame. One of the problems is the bewildering use of different labels such as life history, narrative, life writing, autobiographical and auto/biographical research (use the Glossary, at the end of the book, whenever you feel unsure). We employ 'biographical' as a convenient term to encompass research that can have different labels. We are aware of the dangers of this, that descriptors like narrative or biographical research may denote different meanings and preoccupations as well as things in common. Narrative researchers, for example, tend to focus on the nature and conventions of the stories people tell. Narrative is understood to indicate a temporal sequencing of events, including having a beginning, middle and end. Considerations of time lie at the core of narrative research as does the idea of accounts of events being like fictions, a creative means of exploring realities rather than being fixed and objective, in some absolute sense (Andrews, 2007). Narrative research can also encompass how the myths within a wider culture infuse and shape individual narratives. Witness, for example, the heroic myth of the adult student in the literature of adult education, who journeys from poor beginnings towards glimpses of light – through knowledge – onwards into suffering and yet achieves some final redemption. See too the myth of the adult teacher who can, potentially at least, be redeemed by students, from cynicism and despair in the academy (the film *Educating Rita*, with Julie Walters and Michael Caine has some of these qualities). We may barely be conscious of how we may use a range of myths, or how they use us, in our stories.

The words biography and life history can also have quite distinct meanings. In Denmark, for instance (West et al., 2007), a distinction is drawn between biography or life story as the told life, and life history, in which the researcher brings his or her interpretations and theoretical insights into play. This distinction has influenced biographical researchers in other countries (Roberts, 2002). We recognise how the varying terminology is confusing and have tried to simplify the use of language in the book. Where we feel it necessary to make explicit use of other terminology – such as auto/biography – we do so but try to keep this to a minimum while always remembering that terminology can be a contested field.

Cross-cultural perspectives also inform the book as we deliberately draw on examples of biographical research from across Europe and America as well as parts of the Southern Hemisphere, illustrating research in diverse contexts. We include studies of people in professional settings; or in varying forms of work, in education, in local communities, as well as in families and therapeutic processes. The book encompasses political and social action and the use of biography to chronicle and interpret social movements – such as the rise of feminism – and the critical learning and consciousness raising at the heart of certain biographical projects (Ollagnier, 2007).

Opposition

We illustrate throughout the book the peculiar power and potential of biographical research to generate novel perspectives on important social phenomena and to challenge a tendency in social research to over-simplify complex problems – such as the fear of crime – by insufficiently engaging, in a lifelong and lifewide way, with those most directly concerned. But biographical research, as well as other forms of qualitative enquiry, has its critics, including powerful interests who fund research, even though, as noted in the United Kingdom, biographical methods have begun to receive more substantial funding (Biesta et al., 2008). The United States government, for instance, has gone so far as to legislate that what counts as fundable research needs to be grounded in positivistic traditions, which favour scientific and quantitative rather than qualitative paradigms (Davies and Gannon, 2006).

Biographical research has academic critics too. Some historians question the biographical turn as a sort of retreat into 'fine, meaningless detail', which obscures the big picture and important social policy questions (Fieldhouse, 1996: 119). Researchers get lost, in this view, in the detailed description of lives, even in a narcissistic way perhaps, without helping people understand how society works or how it can be changed for the better. A different criticism comes from certain 'post-structuralist' perspectives, influenced by, among others, the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1979a, 1979b). Foucault conceived human subjectivity as forged in the play of various power–knowledge formations: human beings become positioned by language in ways they may only be dimly aware of, if at all.

Focusing on biographies risks missing a bigger point about how power permeates knowledge and knowing at every level. Power works to control, not least in what has been termed our confessional society. At earlier times, the body was regulated but now it is the soul that is the target, via technologies of the self, expressed in a range of psychological, medical and professional practices. Power, in this view, circulates in and regulates subjectivities, which includes the stories people tell, whether to Oprah Winfrey or researchers. Mention should also be made, however, that Foucault and other post-structuralists have inspired various biographical researchers, including in feminist collective biography, where attempts are made to articulate the discourses through which selves and bodies may be shaped. This can challenge the tendency to think of the individual who exists independently of discourse as well as of time and place (Davies and Gannon, 2006).

We believe that biographical methods offer rich rewards in making sense of self and others in social and historical contexts but that such research raises many questions, which researchers – new or experienced – must consider. In fact, a major reason for writing the book is to share our work, and what has inspired it but also some of the insights we have gained into diverse theoretical, interpretative and practical challenges, and about the relationship between the stories people tell and the realities they purport to represent: between 'realists' at one end of the spectrum and some post-structuralists, at another. Can we in truth talk about reality at all? There is also a question about the nature and status of theory in biographical research. This is considered essential by biographical researchers, yet with a note of

caution: that its development should be grounded in an engagement with real people and their complex experience and stories. Overly abstract theorising tends to be treated with suspicion.

At another level, there are questions about how to do interviews and what makes for good or rich interview material. (Our main interest is the biographical interview, given its central place in social research, but there are many other ways of doing biographical research, using diaries, letters, autobiographies and memorabilia of various kinds. There can be visual biographies, using photography and video. Interviews can be combined with these other sources of evidence.) How should we conduct interviews and what might be meant by a good interview and why? How should we transcribe interviews as well as interpret and code the material? How then to employ the material in our writing or other forms of representation: how do we balance quotations with our interpretations, for instance? Crucially, what of the ethics of biographical research, given that we may engage with difficult, emotionally charged and potentially vulnerable aspects of people's lives? (This is an important issue which we consider later in the book once you have some understanding of biographical research.) Is there a danger of voyeurism, of being over intrusive, or of meddling with people's souls? Finally, what makes such research valid and on what terms? Such questions – both theoretical as well as practical – inform our writing.

Our aim has been to set the biographical method in context, to illustrate its range and potential, but also to engage with the many questions surrounding its use. In the process, we make clear our stance and values as researchers. We favour, under the influence of feminism, more collaborative approaches to research, including interviewing as well as interpretation. We tend, because of our own backgrounds and values, towards working with marginalised peoples or at least to challenging dominant orthodoxies. We favour interdisciplinarity as well as engaging with our own role in the construction of the other's story. And we think it possible to build a convincing sense of the realities of others' lives, of what it is like to be in someone else's shoes, albeit necessitating reflexive understanding of how we, and other influences, may shape the other's story. In charting aspects of our journey, alongside those of others, and by making clear where we stand, and why, as well as by chronicling mistakes and wrong turns, we believe we can help you find your own distinct way.

Who is the book for?

By 'you' we are referring, especially, to students in higher education – both graduate and undergraduate, researchers in academia – but also many professionals, given the burgeoning interest in employing such methods in diverse professional contexts (Chamberlayne et al., 2004; Dominicé, 2000; West et al., 2007). The book represents a sort of invitation to enter a conversation, involving a diverse community of scholars. We seek to offer an informative, comprehensive, accessible and practical guide for university students as well as professionals interested in doing research and engaging with others having similar interests.

The structure of the book

In Chapter 2, we place the development of biographical approaches in historical context, tracing its origins back to the oral tradition and oral history. In doing so we connect the use of oral reports from the French Revolution to the Polish tradition and the emergence of the Chicago School in the United States, and on to more recent developments, particularly feminism. We introduce some of the resistance to biographical methods in disciplines like psychology. We note how the more con-temporary burgeoning of interest in biographical research, and the interest in biog-raphy per se, may be located at a point of time, at least in the 'developed' West, where the social scripts that once shaped people's lives, as in earlier agrarian and industrial societies, have weakened and where the necessity of doing biographical work has increased.

In Chapter 3 we map the application of biographical methods across a number of academic disciplines: in sociology and social policy; in studies of education and life-long learning; and in psychology, psychotherapy, medicine and health care. We note that biographical researchers often work with marginalised peoples and provide examples of such work. In mapping the territory, we note the interdisciplinary shape of some of the terrain, including the emergence of new, psychosocial perspectives.

In Chapter 4 we introduce some of the diverse theoretical and methodological roots of biographical research and note how researchers have drawn on interpretivism, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, nar-rative theory and post-structuralism in their work. However, for the purposes of our book, we give particular attention to those perspectives which have influenced our work: such as symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical theory, and psychosocial and psychoanalytic thinking. We introduce some of the dialogue between sociologists and psychologists as well as the role of reflexivity and subjective and intersubjective insight in doing research of this kind. We develop a provisional framework for cate-gorising different theoretical and epistemological positions and you are asked to con-sider where you might stand in relation to these 'positionings'.

We offer, in Chapter 5, case studies of different ways of using and conceptualis-ing biographical research. We include some of our own work at this point, as part of sharing what we have done and why. This encompasses research among families living in marginalised communities, and into changing identities among adult learners as well as professional learning and struggles to be an authentic doctor or teacher in demanding inner-city contexts. We consider the role of the researcher in shaping the subject of enquiry and raise some ethical issues. As a pedagogic device, we invite you to reflect on aspects of your own autobiography and how this might shape your interest in others' lives.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 we address the specifics of how to do biographical research, which includes generating, analysing and presenting data. We consider how to choose a subject to research. We think about questions such as 'why this topic, why me and why choose a biographical approach in the first place?' We pay attention to working as an individual researcher or as part of a research team. We consider selecting a sample and discuss a question that students often ask: 'can you really work with only one person or a very small number?' Chapter 7 focuses on the

interviewing process and we consider the nature and role of description, and how important our sensitivities as well as conceptual understanding can be in generating what we term 'good stories'. We highlight some differences in approach, especially between the narrative and the interactive interview, which reflect contrasting perspectives on the role of the researcher in the interview process. We illustrate some debates about this in the context of a new trans-European research study of non-traditional learners in higher education and offer examples of interviewing from our own work as well as looking at the different approaches to transcription.

In Chapter 8 we provide an overview of different forms of analysis, from grounded theory to computer-based, as well as more dialogical styles, and explain our own methods in detail. In Chapter 9 we consider the processes of writing biographical research and how it can tend to blur the boundaries between creative and analytic forms of writing. Ways of representing the self and others in stories are also examined. We discuss the practicalities of and the preparation needed in starting to write, such as creating a good environment in which to work. We consider the creativity but also discipline at the heart of good research writing and provide examples. We introduce different styles of writing for different audiences as well as discussing different ways of presenting biographical material. In Chapter 10 we return to the important issues about the validity and ethics of biographical approaches and explore differing notions of validity, and how validity claims for biographical methods are often rooted in notions of verisimilitude, or lifelikeness. And in the peculiar power of biographical research, like good literature, to bring experience to life in intelligible, even profound ways. The chapter further examines the ethical questions raised throughout our text, which includes the boundary between research and therapy.

In the final chapter we summarise the key themes of the book, such as the place of subjectivity and detachment in research and the nature and status of theory in biographical studies as well as the relationship between the particular and the general. We ask what it means, or might mean, to be a biographical researcher, and the shifts of identity that can be involved. We consider the doubts and anxieties as well as rewards research can bring and revisit the excitement and benefits (as well as difficulties) of engaging in academic conversations, across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. We ask what makes a good researcher and discuss the importance of belonging to a research community, and of developing the capacity to engage with and learn from others and otherness. We conclude the book by referring to wider issues and social policy as well as by reflecting on the process of writing this book and what it has meant to us.

Key points

- There is renewed interest in biographical methods in social research.
- It is important to think about how our own biographies may shape our interest in others and their lives.
- A range of different terms can be used to describe the sort of research encompassed in the book. We use the term 'biographical method' as a convenient label to cover a range of approaches with many similarities but also some differences.

FURTHER READING

Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. and Wengraf, T. (2000) (eds) *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science.* London: Routledge.

Plummer, K. (2001) *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to Critical Humanism.* London: Sage.

Roberts, B. (2002) *Biographical Research.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by biographical research?

2. Have you ever studied a relative's life or even your own? In one sense we 'do' biographical research all the time, when, for instance, composing a Curriculum Vitae. What can be important is what is missing as much as what is included. Write a paragraph on your experiences of doing research and/or of composing a CV.

3. Have you read a biography or autobiography? If so who was it about and what were the key points in that person's life.

4. What do you consider might be the strengths and weaknesses of the biographical method?

ACTIVITIES

1. Select an artefact/object that has some significance to you in your life and explain why.
2. Draw your timeline and mark key events in your life on it.