Autobiography is among the most important and valuable vehicles for exploring the human realm in all of its depth, complexity, and richness. Although there are numerous ways to define and conceptualize autobiography, for current purposes it may be considered the specific kind of text that results from the first-person interpretive reconstruction of either a life in its entirety or a significant portion of it, with the aim not merely of recounting “what happened when” but also of understanding, from the vantage point of the current time, the meaning and movement of the past. Located whenever and wherever such interpretive reconstruction occurs—whether in the context of questionnaires, interviews, or those larger literary texts that may be created when an individual takes the time to explore his or her life in its full measure via writing—autobiography is perhaps the primary inroad to the elusive phenomenon of the self, at least as it has emerged in the context of Western history and culture. It is for this reason that during the early part of the 20th century the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, among others, underscored the profound importance of autobiography for the Geisteswissenschaften (the human sciences); insofar as the human sciences were to be founded on methods and modes of inquiry suitable for exploring the distinctively human realm, autobiographical understanding would play a leading role in the project.

Autobiography came to play a prominent role in psychoanalysis—in the “personology” of figures such as Gordon Allport and Henry Murray, in certain strands of anthropological and sociological research (including “autoethnography” in which the researcher's own autobiography serves as the focus of interest), and (most recently) in “narrative inquiry,” a portion of which considers life stories, in their myriad forms, uniquely suited to exploring issues ranging from selfhood and identity to the process of development throughout the life course to the social/cultural “construction” of human lives. With respect to the qualitative research enterprise, autobiography's virtues are many. Foremost among them are what might be termed its ontological wholeness, temporal wholeness, enculturedness, hermeneutic multivocality, and (perhaps most centrally) embeddedness within the fabric of narrativity.

Autobiography is among the most “unrestricted” sources of qualitative data; rather than being limited to some specific behavior or characteristic or region of meaning, its ontological scope is the whole of a life, that is, anything and everything about that life that is meaningful and significant enough to warrant its being told. Drawing on autobiography in qualitative research, thus, lends itself to an “idiographic” perspective in which the individual, in all of his or her complexity, is the preferred unit of analysis.

Autobiography also embodies temporal wholeness; by depicting either a significant portion of a life or a life in its entirety, its interpretive reach is capacious. Rather than isolating the individual from the flow of life, autobiography is oriented toward the flow of life itself, its continuities and its changes, its identity in time and its possible dispersion. Insofar as the human person cannot be known except in the unfolding of his or her unique and unrepeatable history, autobiography may be seen as the privileged path to such knowledge. It should be emphasized in this context that neither ontological wholeness nor temporal wholeness entails the supposition that autobiographies—and selves—are unified and coherent; autobiographies vary markedly in their degree of coherence, as do selves. Whether unified and coherent or less so, these dual conditions of
Because autobiography is predicated on understanding the “real lives” of individuals, qualitative work that draws on autobiography is, of necessity, context specific and “encultured.” Much of social science remains decontextualized and continues to seek to understand human behavior and experience through rarefied environs such as laboratories and through experience-distant means such as paper-and-pencil tests. In the case of autobiography, however, context is of the essence. Given that the natural habitat of humans is culture—the life of language, relationships, and communities—it follows that autobiography is not only about the individual but also about the sociocultural world through which the individual moves. For this reason, qualitative autobiographical research must be vigorously interdisciplinary, cutting across varied disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and history.

Another defining feature of autobiography is what is here termed its hermeneutic multivocality. In speaking of the “hermeneutic,” there is an immediate reference to the fact that autobiographical understanding is irrevocably interpretive; it is an effort after meaning, with its aim, again, not being merely to recount dispassionately this or that event, experience, or segment of a life but rather to “make sense” of it. Along these lines, there is also a poetic dimension to autobiographical understanding; insofar as the interpretive process is a constructive one, it is a work of poiesis or meaning-making. In view of the fact that the personal past permits of multiple “readings” on the part of both individuals themselves and the researchers who study them, there is also an inescapable multivocality—a multivoicedness—to the autobiographical text. This does not mean that autobiographical understanding is arbitrary, or that it is merely a function of interpretive prejudices, whether of the individual or the researcher. As the philosopher Paul Ricoeur argued, the hermeneutic process, as applied to the project of self-understanding, is essentially open and, at the same time, delimited by the semantic reality of the text itself.

Finally, autobiography is to be understood in terms of its embeddedness within the fabric of narrativity and, thus, is intimately tied to what might plausibly be considered the literary dimension of human life itself. As suggested earlier, a significant feature of human lives is that the meaning of experience frequently changes over time, thereby necessitating multiple readings. This suggests that a further significant feature of human lives is that they require recollection, “looking backward” again and again, resituating, reinterpreting, and rewriting the past as a function of one’s ever-changing present. Life events, therefore, may be considered “episodes” in an evolving narrative of the self, and just as the past is perpetually rewritten from the standpoint of the present, so too is the self, with the relationship between self and autobiographical narrative being a dialectical one through and through; even as the self is the source of autobiography, autobiography is the source of the self. Central to the literary dimension of both autobiography and selfhood is the idea of plot, which Ricoeur described as the “synthesis of heterogeneous elements” that is entailed in the imaginative act of drawing together the disparate lineaments of the past via memory into a whole constellation. This act, Ricoeur argued, is a function of “narrativity”—the narrative fabric of human life itself.

Its considerable virtues notwithstanding, autobiography is also considered by some to be suspect as a viable source of social scientific knowledge. As critics of autobiography frequently argue, memory not only is
“reconstructive” but also is capricious, error filled, and distortive and, thus, cannot help but falsify the past. Precisely because it is not a dispassionate recounting of the past “as it was” but rather an imaginative and perhaps wishfully self-aggrandizing act of poetic self-portraiture, memory of the sort that autobiography relies on simply cannot be trusted. Add to the problem of memory the further problem of textual inscription—the process of transforming memory into “literature” (even if only the literature of the interview-generated social science text that will inevitably be a function of the specific context in which one's story is told, to whom, and for what reason)—and the resultant product may be so irreparably tarnished as to disqualify it from the pantheon of bona fide knowledge. As interesting and telling as autobiographies may be, it is their memory-saturated literariness that renders them epistemologically suspect. This, coupled with their notorious unwieldiness as “data” (how, after all, can autobiographies be measured and “contained” and transformed into suitable objects of social science inquiry?), has led to their occupying a questionable place in qualitative research.

Drawing on autobiography in qualitative research nevertheless remains an extraordinarily valuable vehicle not only for exploring the human realm in all of its depth, complexity, and richness but also for casting radically into question what constitutes valid and viable knowledge. Seen from one angle, the literariness of autobiography undermines its truth value and places it too far removed from reality—or at least the reality that objectifying science has seen fit to enshrine. Seen from another angle, however, it is this very literariness that points in the direction of a more open and expansive conception of reality and truth alike, one that is more adequate—and faithful—to the human realm. In this sense, autobiography has the potential to become a pivotal player in the refiguring of knowledge, serving as a much-needed bridge between the sciences and the humanities.

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See also

• Autoethnography
• Biography
• Case Study
• Hermeneutics
• Memoirs
• Narrative Inquiry

Further Readings


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