Understanding the Life History Research Process
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There is an elaborate disciplinary apparatus for condensing and reconstituting . . . narratives. This apparatus is premised on a particular kind of relationship between researchers and people and things studied. Research is a way of imposing order on an external world. . . . Narrative accounts are reduced and inserted into the stream of representation and are transformed within that network, into objects in a debate between researchers from which the producers of the narrative are excluded.


Introduction

In this book we aim to develop a deeper understanding of the process involved in life history and narrative research. This understanding is fundamental to our further developing the idea of narrative learning and narrative pedagogy.

We believe that life history research ought to honour and respect the narrative of the life storyteller first and foremost and, at the same time, be open to opportunities for dialogic encounter and collaborative interpretation between the researcher/listener and the teller. In this chapter, we take a closer look at the life
history interview encounter, the establishment of research relationships, the process of analysing narrative accounts and narrative exchanges, as well as the construction of a life history. This allows us to go deeper and try to understand the nature of the narrative encounter, relationships, and how life history research impacts on both the participant and the researcher.

In order to avoid this outline of life history research process seeming context-free, we draw our insights from the research projects we have engaged in over time, amongst which are the recent example of the ESRC ‘Learning Lives’ project of which Ivor was one of the research directors, and Scherto’s longitudinal research into the overseas Chinese students’ journey of studying abroad and returning to settle back in China. These research projects help illustrate how we designed the research and engaged in the challenges embedded in the different stages of life history research.

Towards the end of the chapter, we offer a narrative profile which captures the changes over time as the participants engaged in dialogic interchange with the researcher and other research participants.

1. Overall life history research process

Although life history cannot be definitively proceduralised it is sensible to characterise the main stages in the process of life history construction. Often, life narratives are collected through a series of in-depth interviews. Working from this starting point, any interview encounter is inevitably overlaid by issues of power and stratification. Researchers can either work to engage with these issues or by ignoring such matters, serve to obscure or exacerbate them. The following sections set out in a somewhat painstaking manner to explain our own experiences with regard to the research process and interview interaction. The intention is to engage the reader in our examination of the life history research process.

Selecting research participants

The first consideration in life narrative interviews is often the selection of research participants. In the Learning Lives project, the researchers were concerned to provide a wide spectrum of participants and conducted an informal survey to establish a cross-section of possible participants in terms of age, gender and class (see Bruner, 1990; Halbwachs, 1980 for an argument to support this need for such a survey). The research team also conducted some ‘pilot’ interviews in order to establish a provisional spectrum of possible situations and themes to review. This was the start of a process of progressive ‘strategic focussing’ to identify and then explore the major themes emerging.
An issue that needs to be firmly confronted when selecting the participants is the selective bias in the choice of life storytellers. For instance, it is a common response of researchers to choose participants that appeal to their own instinctive storylines or the kind of life trajectories that the researcher sympathises with. This has now become a frequent complaint about life history research—the researchers are effectively telling their own stories. To avoid this, the Learning Lives research team tried, where possible, to act against this and chose a wide range of interview participants, particularly those who come within the cross-sections noted above and the themes delineated.

To further illustrate the importance of being aware of researcher bias, we refer here to an example from studies that Ivor was involved in some years ago—an investigation into teachers' life histories. Research into teachers' lives often brought to light the life histories of the more pioneering or innovative teachers. It is less common for the conformist or conservative teacher to be chosen in research accounts. There is a structural and locational reason for this, usually because the research interviewer was previously a teacher who moved into an academic position, and stories of his or her prior experiences as a teacher are often associated with those of a pioneer innovator. This autobiographical imperative sometimes leads the researcher to focus on teachers who have had similar experiences as non-conformists. The result can be a biased account which may overestimate the prospects for change and innovation in schools, where in effect, schools are often embedded in contextual inertia and such circumstances do not often favour the pioneering innovator (Goodson, 1995). To resolve this, Ivor and his team found it necessary to cover a spectrum of participating teachers from pioneering ones through to more conformist and conservative teachers.

**Setting the scene for research interview and building trust**

Having chosen the research participants, the next stage in developing life history research is what might be called 'setting the scene'. Strangely, often little thought is given to the background context in which the life history interview can be conducted, and yet it is of enormous importance. So often, only the researchers themselves are familiar with the methodology and the rationale behind the life history approach to the interview process, and such 'technical' details are seldom conveyed to the research participants.

We believe it is crucial for researchers to share their understanding and intentions with the participants. Sharing methodology not only empowers the participants to engage more actively in the research but also reinforces the participants' awareness of the importance of their own experiences and stories in the research.
and the significance of sharing and listening to each other's stories during the research interviews.

Setting the scene for the interview can be the key to the interaction. To give an example, in a recent life history workshop, two women who did not know each other decided to sit facing a picture throughout the interview rather than facing each other as a way of easing into the interview. The advantage of sitting side by side is that you can slowly turn to each other when you are ready to make eye contact instead of insisting on it from the beginning. If you insist upon it from the beginning, it often forces the situation which, to these two women, would have felt very unnatural. Laurence Stenhouse, an early English ethnographer, once argued that the best way to conduct interviews was by sitting alongside each other while driving a car. This way, the interviewee can look out of the window and only occasionally turn to make eye contact with the interviewer. Likewise the interviewee is free from the immediate interrogative eye of the interviewer. As if to confirm the point, it is a well-known fact recorded in a number of films and novels that taxi drivers elicit the most amazing confessions from the people who travel in their cabs and this is possibly because of the positioning of the two interlocutors, and the fact that they are never likely to meet again.

Nonetheless, the setting of the scene for the interview is a highly personal decision although one that has a great impact on the subsequent interview(s). It needs to be related very carefully to the next stage of the process, which is the building of trust. Building trust with the interviewee is an incredibly personal and complicated process. Trust has to be established if the interview is to be successfully conducted and for a reasonable interactive 'flow' to take place. In a sense, the speedy nature of the conventional research interview can be the problem. It is usually the case that the interviewer and the interviewee have to quickly bond with each other; come to some kind of agreement with regard to the interview process and rapidly develop some sense of intimacy and trust before there can be any meaningful exchange of views.

Life history research often requires more than one interview, which makes building trust an endeavour over a longer period than the 'speed dating' procedure described above would allow. There is no programmatic way of establishing this pattern of building trust. It is wholly a question of working with human chemistry and there is no procedural formula. What is clear, however, is that the more one explains the process and the use of the life history approach to the interviews, the more that in itself begins to build trust. In our own research, often during the first meeting, we, as the researchers, made a point of explaining the purpose of the interview, how it might proceed, and what was going to happen to the interview mate-
rrial when the interviews were completed. Often, this transaction was conducted around the signing of the informed consent protocol and the explanation of this protocol all came to be part of the process of building up trust.

The interview(s)

We see the interviews and thereafter the developing of a life history profile as a personal and intimate process from the beginning and believe that it needs to be based on a reciprocal interchange of views. Because we want the person's life story as experienced by him/her to be the central axis upon which the interview is based, our initial interviews tend to follow a particular pattern.

In the interview process, the aim is to encourage personal elaboration and 'flow' with minimal interrogation in the first instance. 'Flow' refers to the form an interview takes when the interviewees take off and begin to talk freely about their experiences, transitions, concerns and missions. It is easy when reading interview transcripts to establish when flow is taking place, but during the research, the flow has to be carefully encouraged.

For a start, there will be very few questions and the sections of interviewee's narration will be long, intense and meaningful. A peppering of interview questions can quite quickly break this flow, and we try to avoid doing this unless it is absolutely strategically and cognitively necessary. It is almost as if we, as the researchers, intend to keep a 'vow of silence' in the initial phases of the interview. This is not to say that the interviews are totally unstructured. There is often a narrative guide (usually consisting of the themes that emerged during the pilot interviews) used in two ways: first, as a 'fall-back' mechanism if the 'vow of silence' method does not work; secondly, even when the life storyteller is in full flow, there will be aspects of coverage which have not been fully explored.

The key is to give the participants the opportunity to be in overall control of the ordering and sequencing of their life stories. In return, this creates an appropriate context and space for 'flow' to occur. A major reason for us, as researchers, seeking to maximise the narrative flow of the life storyteller rather than directing or intervening in the initial process, is that it provides crucial clues as to the narrative character of the teller. Narrative character refers to the particular form and content of the life story (also see Chapter Four). It also provides some remission from the 'power' of the initiating interviewer/researcher (although we are cognisant that this can never be fully suppressed). The interviewer wants to unfold not only how the interviewee can respond to narrative probing, but also what past and existing narrative activity is going on as part of the person's lived experience. The breadth and depth of narrative activity help the researcher understand the degree
Part I: Narrative as Research Methodology

of personal elaboration and construction that goes into creating narratives. To understand where on this spectrum of agency life storytellers are placed, it is then vitally important to let the teller sequence and develop her life story account in her own way.

**Developing life history**

Building on the initial life stories in the interview, a further dialogic interchange is developed. This is either a second interview or the later stages of an extended narrative exchange. There the two interlocutors, the interviewer and the interviewee, move more towards a 'grounded conversation' and away from the somewhat singular narrative of the initial life story telling. For us, this move to a grounded conversation is an extremely crucial move, for it signals the move from life story to life history, by which we mean the progressive understanding of the life story is being located within its historical contexts through collaborative interpretation and meaning-making, as well as triangulation by using other sources of testimonies, documentaries and historical data. This means approaching the questions we listed in Chapter Two but also inquiring into why stories are told in particular ways at particular historical moments in the life story to locate its meaning.

As we have already pointed out in Chapter Two, the distinction between life story and life history clarifies a major difference in the types of narrative research. Much work undertaken in the name of narrative research focuses on eliciting other people's stories. This objective becomes both the starting point but also the end point of the process. The narrative researcher becomes the sponsor or 'scribe'—eliciting, writing down and indeed, often publishing other people's stories. The approach is essentially passive and politically quietist. Little work can be done, of the kind described as using 'triangulation' in life history work. By contrast, life history work underlines the importance of placing the life narratives in their historical contexts, and there is a strong sense of research collaboration which helps locate each unique story in a broader frame—providing wider historical insights for the life storyteller and the broader audience for whom the story is recounted.

In summary, despite our rejecting a procedural approach to life history research, we have nevertheless emphasised a possible phased process, especially a move from life story narration stressing the agency of the teller, to a more collaborative grounded conversation where the interviewee and the interviewer seek further insights into the life story being told. Whilst conceptually and methodologically distinct, these phases often shade into one another with an overlapping period at which point the interviewer and the interviewee begin to probe and question the stories more actively and collaboratively.
This phased process moves us from life story ‘narration’ to life history ‘collaboration’ in our research. This is an absolutely crucial transition, not least because some narrative traditions remain locked in the first phase—namely the researchers ‘collect’ people stories and accept them as ‘data’. The interpretation is often undertaken by the interviewer/researcher, working alone, at a subsequent stage. In this case, the *prima facie* evidence is the narrated life story. There is then, no second phase where life history is collaboratively generated. Collaboration involves employing other sources of data, such as other people’s testimonies and a range of documents. This allows the interlocutors to historically locate the life narrative. In life history work, the interpretation and development of data are through the collaborative interpretation between the life storyteller and researcher.

To a great extent, life history interviews interrupt both the ‘ongoing conversation’ which underpins the life narration and aims to sponsor the dialogic encounter and further narrative meaning-making. This potentially leads to learning and transforming of the understanding of the interviewer and interviewee’s life journeys as well as clarifying ways to engage in their future actions. We will expand on this in later chapters of this book.

Another pre-condition of life history work is the belief in human potential. By collaboratively interpreting personal narratives and ‘locating’ life stories as part of ‘a chain of social transmissions’, and understanding them in their historical context, the scene is set for the potential transformation of both interlocutors. To understand the historical conditions of a life as lived and of a life story as told is to comprehend that our world is socially constructed. Once the process of social construction is made more transparent through the collaboration, it becomes possible to think of new acts of social construction. Life history work then is both a reformulation of individual and collective memory and an ongoing development of ‘social imagination’.

Social imagination is one of the most empowering and transformative modalities. *1984* by George Orwell tells how the collective understanding of history and social imagination are the twin evils that ‘Big Brother’ seeks to control. Hence work which sponsors collective memory and social imagination as narrative encounters can prefigure a transformative possibility. The life history exchange is then a place for imaginative narrative construction. As Czarniawarska (2004) says, a life history interview can ‘become a micro-site of narrative production’ (p. 51). Our view is that the activation of narrative production is an aspiration shared by both parties in narrative encounters. One task is the co-production of a story of action within a theory of context—a new narrative transformed by historical understanding and enhanced social imagination. As Brooks (1984) said:
We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of social stories not yet completed. (p. 3)

The life history encounter that works at the point of this intersection in a modality of exchange and sharing is based on reciprocity and trust. It involves then, the co-construction of meaning and a re-constitution of selfhood, as we have described. Thus life history represents a specific set of values and aspirations. According to Goodson (2003), it is a 'prefigurative practice'. A prefigurative practice is one that foreshadows and embodies the kind of world everyone would like to see exist more generally. It is set out in the microcosm of the encounter in order to make a pattern for relationships in an imagined ideal world. This world needs many ingredients to facilitate human development, and some of which are present in the narrative encounter.

As described here, life history work aspires to develop a dialogic exchange of views between the researcher and the participant(s). We are aware of the proactive stratified terrain on which this approach is played out and of the difficulties in reworking these expectations and structures. Nonetheless, life history interviews are a production location for the mutual exploration of meaning and selfhood. The life storyteller can be the expert par-excellence in the details of his/her life, and this sits well alongside the, no doubt, over-legitimised, expertise of the social researcher. Moreover, the initial life story interview insists that the interviewer listens very carefully. The encounter then builds on the expertise of the life storyteller. As the life story moves towards the life history, the encounter works to develop a theory of context or a 'genealogy of context' (Goodson 1992a) where both parties can exchange views, vernacular theories, patterns of explanation, and in doing so, arrive at a new understanding—mutually negotiated—of the social, cultural and historical 'location' of the narrative (Also see Gill, 2005; 2010).

In developing the life history together through a collaborative effort the very intimacy of the exchange can contribute to a pattern of trust and reciprocity in learning. All the most generative life history encounters have these characteristics at their basis. The facility to construct a fully grounded life history together can be seen as engaging in an educational endeavour. In this way, life history work involves a particular 'pedagogic encounter', as meaning and shifts in the sense of self are both constituted through learning. This is what we later term 'narrative pedagogy' but here we only refer to it from the angle of life history research.
2. Life history research as a site for narrative construction

Following the outlines of the life history research process and the process of co-constructing life histories, this chapter goes on to make an important point that when life history work is conducted solely on the story level, i.e., the researcher tends to begin and end the project by 'capturing' a people's life stories, the part that the researcher plays is essentially to act as the scribe of these stories and present them as the articulate and authentic voice of the people, for example, the teachers or whichever group is being interviewed. This could leave, for instance, the teachers and the teachers' consciousness exactly where they were at the start of the process and does not necessarily allow any ground for a learning conversation or a progressive reflexive understanding to emerge from the exchange between the two people (researcher and the life storyteller) who are talking together.

As we have already pointed out, in some narrative work the story approach starts and ends with narration. After narration, only the researcher, not both parties, goes away to interpret and make sense of the data or the stories collected and heard. The analysis and theorisation belong to the researcher and the academic world. The researcher has to take over the remaining process because in the life story approach, researchers feel it is their responsibility to continue the analytical and hermeneutical endeavour. So these researchers listen to these stories again and again, have them transcribed, read them in parallel to others' experiences, interpret and analyse them, and sieve through them in the light of existing theories. This appears to be the kind of systematic approach that any 'responsible' researcher would take. What the life story approach researchers do next is to hand the transcriptions over to the participants and ask: 'Do you agree with my reading of your life?' By this time, although it seems to be an empowering act, have these researchers effectively disempowered their participants by taking over a key part of the process?

Once the researchers put things into an academic framework, there is such perceived authority in what they produce that it immediately overpowers the participants. They look at the text and they don't understand how just one aspect of their personal stories has now acquired layers of interpretation and theorisation. They don't know how to relate to this project any more but are in awe of what the research has been able to do with their stories. Most participants might venture to disagree with part of the transcripts but rarely disagree with the interpretation or theorisation. It must be right, to their minds, as researchers are seen as people with powerful rationalising intellects. In this way, there is no equal partnership between the researcher and the researched from the outset. The researcher holds the power of knowledge, and acts as the knower, while the storyteller is overwhelmed by the power of academe and acts as the information provider.
What is described here is how life history research can, by contrast, be typically an intervention which involves conversation and narrative exchanges between two people engaging in a collaborative process of reflexivity and meaning-making. The interlocutors help each other in the development of their personal narrative. This potentially leads beyond the original story that is told, i.e., the starting consciousness of the storyteller to the interviewer and the storyteller engaging with new understandings, new data, new documentation, and new testimonies from themselves and from other people. The emerging narrative is the result of this exchange. In other words, the life history evolves when all the other bits of information have been fed into the progressive narrative development. Therefore, it is not just 'you tell me your story, I'll write it down'. In fact, the initial life story merely starts off the conversation but does not finish it. It is the encounter between the research collaborators and in the range of new perspectives brought to that ongoing encounter that an understanding of lived experiences evolves which goes beyond the original story itself.

In our studies of teachers' lives we have seen through the life history approach that recent teachers have been, in one sense, constructed by a training process. If we interview recently qualified teachers in the first years of their teaching experience, the stories they tell are primarily of teachers who are technically compliant with what a system of fixed curriculum, targets, testing and league tables wants them to do. By contrast, in life history interviews with teachers in the 1970s, they told completely different stories which were often stories about themselves as 'autonomous professionals' who could initiate all kinds of innovative practices within their own classrooms. The life history interview and the dialogic exchange can help the researcher and the teacher participants come to an understanding of why they, the teachers, tell particular stories in the way they do at particular times. Teachers thus become more aware of how teaching as a profession is politically and socially constructed.

Life history involves a collaboration through which data is developed in a prolonged reciprocal exchange—mutual interpretation and emerging theories are shared, discussed and 'tested'. In this way, understandings of the life narrative emerge in the course of the exchange, and interpretations are grounded in the dialogic encounter. Life narrative is therefore not static recitation but an evolving process of narrative re-construction, re-telling and becoming.

Goodson (2006, p. 18) argues that it is necessary to 'build in an understanding of the context, historical and social' in which human experience and learning take place. Therefore life history, at its best, aspires to be a narrative exchange between equals, two people searching together for meaning and understanding. The
search is to 'locate' the selves within their respective stories and in their broader social and historical contexts.

3. Narrative as research intervention

This way of understanding life history research poses a huge challenge from the point of view of research ethics. The non-interventionist approach can make a researcher feel more comfortable as he/she does not aim to interrupt the participants' lives. All the researcher does is to allow the participants to share their lived experience or life stories, without necessarily leading to any further consequences. A social researcher who is conscious of research ethics will also be comforted that he/she is broadcasting the participants' voices as they are heard.

Indeed, this view of social research has a seductive appeal, including the intention to empower, to give a voice to the silenced and to access a wider audience, to transcribe, and to bridge the lived world with the intellectual world. However, as discussed earlier, momentary power is perhaps the most profoundly disempowering. That is the ultimate paradox.

Here we are arguing for something different: a more considered exchange of stories and a clearer sense of dialogic encounter. In moving from life story focused narrative research to life history work we seek to change both the underpinning research methodology and the potential for reciprocal exchange.

What may also be derived from this is that whenever research elicits people's life narratives or uses them as a basis for understanding the social world, the researcher has to think about the methodology as well as the pedagogy of using life stories. The reason for including pedagogy is because all social research projects inevitably lead to some change in the participants' understanding after an engagement in the narrative process. The change can be on different levels, such as an individual's perception of the social world or their sense of self, ideas about the life that has been lived so far and how he/she might live his/her life in the future, and so forth. In a way, however the research ethics are defined and whatever steps are taken to protect the respondents, change happens. If it happens anyway, it is then necessary to reflect to what extent, as social researchers, we actually engage in the process.

This leads to the view that life history research is not just a narrative encounter; it is a pedagogic encounter. This aspect will be explored in more detail in later chapters, including an investigation into what kind of learning takes place during the narrative encounter.
Historically, the narrative turn aimed to help researchers move away from a positivist approach to a more holistic and interpretative approach to understanding the social world. There are other uses of narratives, as illustrated in Chapter Two. This suggests that there has been recognition of the importance of the human subject and human subjectivity, rather than studying people as objects. The complexity of narrative research and the various pitfalls embedded in it call for more mindful and careful thinking before launching into narrative and life history projects, especially as there is an ethical minefield out there. A set of discussions is necessary in order to prepare researchers for the complexity of social encounters. There is a need to sensitise the human encounter, but paramount is to understand more deeply the nature of such encounters. We will attempt to do this in the second part of the book.

The challenges embedded in life history research force researchers to accept that there is no way to completely suspend power relations and stratification and other issues in the world. It is just not possible. This kind of encounter forces the researcher and those being researched to confront these issues together in an open communication. That is the supreme virtue of this form of research process.

Therefore, trying to remain distant and objective and to leave the research subject’s life intact is impossible. One claim is that narrative and life history research inevitably interrupts the participants’ life by posing deep personal questions and offering opportunities for self-reflection (Gill, 2005). In this way, life history research starts with the person’s narrative and ends with an examined account of life or lives in context.

Life history also offers another opportunity to re-examine the nature of social research in a more critical way, not only from the point of view of the complexity of social interaction and social dynamics that sociologists are already addressing, such as gender, power, race, class and so on, but also by opening up the complex inner landscape of a human being, of a person’s emotions, subjectivity, identity and personhood. Endless ethical debates about life history research will remain, and so they should. Narrative work is fraught with ethical and emotional dilemmas and so is human life.

4. ‘A bird in a cage’—Jasmine’s narrative

Elsewhere, we have argued:

The role of the narrative researcher is to facilitate and promote the voice of the participant, and often to present that voice unchanged, for fear of ‘academic colonisation’. Indeed colonisation has been a real issue in social research. However,
forgoing all collaboration is, we would argue, a form of abdication. It can leave the teller or the participant with their story 'uncontaminated' but also unchanged. In other words, no further understanding is pursued (Gill & Goodson, 2010, 157-158).

In this section of the chapter, we want to use a case study to give an example of how research conversation can serve as an intervention and an opportunity for learning and the growth of the research participant.

Jasmine was one of ten students Scherto interviewed on a research project which investigated overseas Chinese postgraduate students' journey from China to study in the UK. Jasmine was twenty-two when the project started. The project interviews lasted for one year during which time Scherto met with the students for individual interviews at least once a term, and in a group of three or four once a term. There were many informal meetings in between where ideal opportunities were created for the group to share stories and for dialogic interchange. The following is the edited narrative profile that Jasmine and Scherto co-constructed:

When I was growing up, the majority of young people of my age in China came from one-child families. The media often says that these lone children were brought up as little 'emperors' and 'empresses', and were the centre of attention of their extended families.

But my life was nowhere like that of an empress.

I was born into an intellectual family. My father is a university lecturer and my mother an editor and later an entrepreneur with her own publishing company. Both of my parents came from very humble backgrounds and had worked really hard to arrive at their positions. So working hard is their motto. In a large country such as China, most people have the same motto. I understand it very well and appreciate the kind of struggle people go through in order to avoid staying in poverty.

As far as I can remember, I had always been kept under close parental control like a bird in a cage. This perhaps was due to the fact that my parents were in their late thirties when I arrived and they wanted to take good care of me. Still as a child, I really resented my parents' so-called protection and the fact that they made all the decisions for me simply because they know what is best.

Growing up as a kept bird, at the same time, I was very much encouraged to explore the world of knowledge. I learned to read and write at an early age and have been a keen reader even since. I can still remember my childhood favourites
—the great Chinese masterpieces such as the Monkey King stories, the Legends of the Water Margin, stories of the Three Kingdoms, children’s fairy tales by Hans Andersen and the brothers Grimm and tales from the Arabian Nights. These books encouraged my enthusiasm for reading, and created a world of fantasy. Books were my escape, books made me feel free.

Schooling, even primary school, was like torture—large classes, teaching was mainly drilling, and work was always so heavy. I never felt that I had any childhood. At school, we sang songs about childhood—oh sweet childhood, innocent childhood, joyous childhood full of discoveries and fantasies. But where was the sweetness, the innocence, the joy, the discoveries? My generation had none of these experiences as the children were turned into little studying machines in order to compete for limited opportunities to enter higher education.

The only real childhood I had was in those books, but even that didn’t last long. The fantasy world had to give place to loads of homework every day. My parents removed all the ‘unnecessary’ books from my room, and replaced them with prep-books for exams. They kept saying that if I failed the exams I’d have no future. I must work hard and not be ‘dreamy’ because no one can pass the university entrance exam by simply dreaming.

But I was dreaming. I dreamed of the day when I could be free, for instance, to leave home and to go to the university. There was no question that I’d be heading towards higher learning—one of my parents’ expectations. For them, my future was a good school, a good university and a good job.

I had my own plans—I wanted to attend a university in order to be free from my parents. So I worked very hard and willingly in order to do well at the university entrance exams. I did excel and came up with good results. Then when it was my turn to choose the university to apply to, my parents suggested, no, they never suggested anything, they insisted that I attend a local university. It happened to be very prestigious—it ranked 5th in the country. You can’t imagine my disappointment—the bird failed to escape from the cage.

University life wasn’t too bad; at least I didn’t have that much pressure from my parents to study hard. I also got to live on campus during the week, and reported back home at the weekend. I studied mass media and communication and found the subject really interesting.

At that time, many Chinese families were able to afford to pay for their children to study abroad. A number of students from my university were awarded scholarships to study in North America and in Europe. My heart took flight just imaging the freedom I would have to be so far away from my parents. Don’t get me wrong, I do love them and appreciate their love and protection, but I also
believed that they could love me in a different way, for instance, by trusting me to be capable of flying high without their help, or finding my own happiness.

My parents took my desire to study abroad as high aspiration and surprisingly they actually encouraged me. They wanted me to be part of the elite and were willing to financially support me to pursue an overseas study plan. So I took this opportunity and that was my escape route—*the bird finally flew from the cage*.

My first encounter with the West was love at first sight. With the help of Chinese students who had arrived earlier, I settled in England quickly. Despite many adjustment issues that I had to face such as cooking, shopping, adaptation to Western approaches to teaching and learning at the university, finding friendship amongst ‘strangers’, and being a stranger in a new place myself, living and studying in England and travelling in Europe was a time of tremendous growth for me.

I was aware of many changes in me—I was becoming independent in managing my personal life, but also becoming independent in my own thinking, which was most significant. What I loved most was to be able to make decisions for myself and know that these were good decisions. For instance, I chose to do an MA in Media Studies with an element of anthropology and then I studied a second MA in Cultural Anthropology because I was clear where my interests were and I was motivated to study. I also travelled a lot and when you travel, you have to make decisions constantly. These experiences gave me confidence in my own abilities.

In sharing a house with students from different parts of the world, I came across many different viewpoints about the meaning of life and about things of value. These different attitudes towards life, personal objectives and different ways of seeing one’s place in the world have had a significant impact on me. I was truly inspired to take a fresher look at my perceptions and worldviews.

Being part of this research project and having such extended conversations with you and with other Chinese students on the project also helped bring many of my encounters and intercultural experience into focus, and made me more aware of cultural differences, and understand better why people think and do things so differently. Above all, I feel that I have now a better understanding of what it is to be Chinese. Before I left China, I looked up to the West, and thought everything Western was good and more interesting—Western education is better where children can play more and are happier, the environment is cleaner, there is more democracy, more human rights and more justice... Don’t we all think the grass is greener and moon brighter on the other side? Now I am more critical when thinking about these differences, but I am also more interested in seeing China with fresh eyes.

I am a changed person in many senses, and sometimes I say and do things in ways that surprise myself. I realise that I am also developing a new personality—I am
more mature, open, less shy, and I am more, what is the word, indomitable, than I have ever known. I am more appreciative of my parents. They have also noticed the changes, and I don’t think they are quite sure of what it all means when I return home.

I am ready to return. That is what I see as the essence of freedom. I have flown away from the cage where I felt captive, but now I can return with a sense of freedom because I have a stronger sense of myself. I am returning to the place where I grew up because I know there are things I want to do there and I think I can make a difference to the people whom I care about.

Many Chinese students want to stay in England or Europe for work experience with a view to settle, but I know that my work, my life and my place are in China. I want to produce TV documentaries that tell particular kinds of stories, the stories of the forgotten, the abused, the vulnerable and the ordinary and we all know that there are many of those stories in China. I want to tell these stories in ways that they can be heard by people who can help make changes. That will be my project, for now.

5. Dialogue and reflection

Ivor: Reading and re-reading Jasmine’s narrative profile, I can really see that your research itself served as an intervention in a number of ways: first, the research interviews provided an ideal space for Jasmine to make sense of her lived experience growing up in China as a lone child. She has chosen a really interesting metaphor that captures well her journey into freedom. Second, the research brought together participants for dialogic exchange and shared meaning-making. It was clear from the text that she was developing new understanding about her own culture, for instance. Third, the research conversation and editing her own profile further gave her an opportunity to consolidate an emerging and stronger sense of herself. Let’s just take a moment and review the process you went through to come to the text.

Scherto: This text was not the full transcript but rather a narrative profile and intended to be short. Jasmine turned twenty-four when we completed editing it. So nearly two years had gone past since the research first started. She revising the text to a certain extent to reflect her understanding over time.
The text was a collaborative effort. I put together the first draft after reading through the huge transcripts of three in-depth one-to-one interviews and conversations and many group discussions. Jasmine read the draft and keenly edited her own words. She said that this was making her narrative more retrospective and introspective. She deleted some text and added others. For instance, where she discussed the loss of childhood, there is only one line in her initial interviews. The paragraph was added afterwards as a result of a group conversation about the differences between schooling in Britain and in China. Lin, another participant in my research, was studying for her MA in Education Studies in the UK, and she shared with the group some of the debates currently being carried out in England about children’s wellbeing and social and emotional development. Jasmine then had long passionate discussions with Lin and others about the lack of respect for children in China and the fact Chinese schooling system actually prevents children from enjoying learning, etc. Then we read the edited text, discussed and finalised it together.

Ivor: I can’t help but feeling that there are several gaps where there is more to explore.

Scherto: You are right to say that there are gaps in Jasmine’s narrative profile. In this excerpt, Jasmine’s decision to work as a documentary maker reads somewhat out of context. The context was that as a media student and later a student of cultural anthropology, Jasmine noticed that China was becoming a hot topic for the Western media. But to her, too much emphasis was laid on the country’s unprecedented economic growth, and not enough on understanding China as a whole and on the ordinary people’s lives. The research provided a space for Jasmine to have conversations on this topic with other participants too. Jasmine felt frustrated by the fact that the gulf between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ is widening, and little is done to help the under-privileged. After being exposed to charity work and philanthropist work through her own volunteering during summer holidays, Jasmine became more aware of her own privileges and the suffering of those who live in poverty and desperation.
In one interview, Jasmine expressed immense compassion when she spoke about her experience in a Chinese hospital where her mother stayed for a week due to a minor operation. Jasmine saw the luxury of the private room her mother was in, which was in total contrast to the general ward, where more than twenty people were in the same room, and the chaos in the hospital corridors. She was compelled by her empathy and began to listen to these people's stories.

There were many other critical incidents where Jasmine explored the changes that she was experiencing in relation to herself and how our conversations helped her to internalise such shifts. These were in the interview transcripts and could not be included in the profile sketch due to the limited space allowed.

Ivor: You mentioned Jasmine's emotional responses in the research conversations. How significant were emotions in your research interaction?

Scherto: In the narrative encounter, feelings and emotions were responded to with intense listening and feedback rather than judgment and opinions. Sharing in-depth personal stories allowed myself (the researcher) and the participants to focus on what stimulated emotional responses, and we worked together to reflect on and analyse these experiences.

Ivor: As a researcher, you are moving from an acquaintance relationship with the participants to friendship. This is a question about research ethics. Kenneth Plummer (2001) encourages all researchers to reflect on their own emotional selves, in particular, after spending a period of time with an individual or a group of individuals, and after listening to their stories intently as you did because there is an 'active emotional re-engagement', in Plummer's words.

Scherto: Indeed, Plummer suggests that the researcher may even 'fall in love' with the participants. Therefore it is necessary for researchers to be more reflexive about the emerging relationships in the research. Certainly through this research, friendships grew and I was close to all the participants, and remain friends with at least two of them. What comforted me was this shared meaning-making in a group
and the opportunity for the participants to co-construct the texts of their narrative profiles. I felt that I wasn't exploiting the ‘informants’ by interrupting the flow of their lived experience, then going away and making a thesis out of their generosity. Instead, the research was a deep reflection and learning for all. Such profound sharing and intense listening created bonds between us in ways that only close friendship could have done.

Questions for discussion

In this chapter, whilst illustrating the process of life history research, we also made a point that the life history should aim to provide ‘a story of action within a theory of context’. In examining work employing life stories and narratives, it is essential to consider the balance between ‘stories of action’ and historical and social ‘theories of context’.

In the above discussion we have argued that many narrative methods focus on people's stories, especially their stories of action. Little attempt has been made to develop theories of context.

• Take a narrative research study and examine the balance in the text between people's 'stories' and the development of a 'theory of context'.
• Take time to see how the researcher developed the theory of context if any, especially what other sources of data were being employed and how they were used.
• If the research begins and ends with stories, is this because the aim is to 'capture the person's story' and/or is it because of the nature of the research method employed?
• Scrutinising a narrative research study also involves assessing the aims of the researcher and evaluating the nature of the research collaboration. How does the collaboration (if any) affect the original life story told?

In this chapter, we reiterated that life history work tends to advocate a collaborative approach to understanding narrative and that the researcher and her participant(s) move into the interpretive phase together within the domain of the research questions and life stories shared. The aim is to collaborate over stories of action but also to develop emerging theories of context.

• How practical is it to seek to develop narratives and theories of context collaboratively? Is it too time consuming?
• Do emerging themes and theories of context allow researchers and participants to develop a broader sociological, historical, and even philosophical understanding through life history work?

• How do issues of power and the 'academic division of labour' intrude onto the process and how can they be dealt with?

• Examine your own experience in the field. What are the sources of expertise and disciplinary criteria employed in your research interpretation? Does the research process change the understandings of the interviewee or merely record existing understandings? In what way does the research process change your own understanding in terms of both the research question and yourself as a person?

Both the narrative and life history methods enter into the complex web of human subjectivity and perception. This moves such research into a domain of great ambivalence, nuance, uncertainty and even chaos. When compared with the narrow certainties of more positivist methods, this makes such research time-consuming and demanding.

• Is the time involved and complexity of the undertaking proportional to the understanding developed? Is a full immersion into participants' narratives and life histories necessary to develop a full understanding of human subjectivity?

• Some researchers have applied mixed-method approaches to the studies of people's narratives. Compare the strengths and weaknesses of the full immersion approach and mixed-method approach.

Further Reading


