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THE LIFE STORY APPROACH: A CONTINENTAL VIEW

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Abstract

This review examines recent developments in the use of life stories (i.e. oral, autobiographical narratives), placing particular emphasis on work done in continental Europe. Two main trends are identified. The first focuses primarily upon the symbolic in social life and meaning in individual lives. Ways of collecting and analyzing life stories within this perspective (e.g. the narrative interview, objective hermeneutics) are described. The second main trend considers interviewees as informants—in ethnographic fashion. The aim is to get accurate descriptions of the interviewees' life trajectories in social contexts, in order to uncover the patterns of social relations and the special processes that shaped them. The emphasis here is on comparison, on searching for negative cases, and on reaching the point of saturation whereby the sociologist's mental representation of given patterns may be generalized to a whole social milieu. The first trend is now developing faster in Germany and the Anglo-Saxon countries, while the second attracts more attention in the Latin countries of Europe and America.

Because life stories are put to multiple uses, no standard methodology is expected to appear in the near future. But several well-tested ways of collecting, analyzing, and publishing life stories should emerge. Life stories are shown to be a rich ground for the formulation of substantive theories, which are conceived of as interpretations rather than as scientific explanations. Different ways of assessing the validity of interpretations are mentioned. Work done with

life stories in some other disciplines such as linguistics, history (i.e. oral history), psychology, and anthropology are briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Empirical sociology is emerging from a long period when a single method of data collection—the survey—was the focus of scientific effort and legitimacy. Surveys possess unique qualities; so, however, do other techniques, and calls for methodological pluralism have at last been heard. This development is important not only for empirical research but for theory-building as well because the form that sociological thinking takes is *not* independent of the methods used.

Throughout sociology's short history, survey research has been closely connected at the epistemological level with a "scientist," as opposed to an "interpretive," conception of sociology. Within empirical sociology, however, most interpretive studies so far have not addressed the issues of historical and comparative analysis but have focused instead on specific fields, i.e. on situations that are defined spatially and temporally and that give rise to typical interaction patterns. Conversational analysis and other branches of ethnomethodology, as well as symbolic interactionist studies based on participant observation, are examples of this type of research. It is appropriate to use this approach in those cases where the field itself determines the key features of action. This seems to occur at one of two extremes: on the one hand, fleeting interactions (encounters) where there is no deeper personal involvement; on the other hand, situations with very strong structural configurations (e.g. total institutions or highly relevant stigmatizations) that level out any individual orientations or channel them into a small number of basic orientations. In both of these cases, it may be sufficient to treat the actor as having a simple instrumental or strategic orientation. But in the wide domains of actively structured everyday life, a biographical frame of reference is more productive.

Our definition of the life story approach is more restricted than that usually given in the American literature on interpretive methodology. The authors of most American texts refer to Thomas & Znaniecki (1958 [1918–1920]) and speak of the "personal documents" composing a life history: letters, diaries, personal records, open interviews, and finally, autobiographies and tape-recorded life stories (Blumer 1939; Angell 1945; Denzin 1970a,b; also Paul 1979; Plummer 1983). Thus, no systematic distinction is drawn between the broader conception of personal documents, on the one hand, and life stories, on the other. Both of these sources give the researcher access to the actor's perspective: his or her values, definitions of situations, and knowledge of social processes and rules that he or she has acquired through experience. But if one takes the dimension of personal history seriously, it is appropriate to insist on a

more specific characterization: the life story approach should be based on narratives about one's life or relevant parts thereof.

Because the life story refers implicitly to the totality of a person's experience, because there are many ways to elicit a life story and more than a single way to talk about one's past, life stories (as oral, autobiographical narratives generated through interaction) potentially lend themselves to a multiplicity of uses. Interest in them is developing quickly in European countries such as Germany, Italy, France, and Britain, but also in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. It is certainly paradoxical that the two countries—namely the United States and Poland—that had the strongest traditions of biographical research before the war (cf Kohli 1981) have not contributed proportionately to the present revival. This situation should not last long, however (for the United States, see Denzin 1970b and Plummer 1983; for Poland, see *Sisyphus—Sociological Studies* 1982).¹

We have been asked to review these developments here. Our paper represents a "continental view" in a double sense: first, it is written by two continental Europeans; and second, its sections are organized by country, cultural-linguistic area, or continent and discuss the research going on within each one. One reason for organizing the paper this way lies in the nature of the basic material of biographical research, i.e. peoples' lives. While this type of research does have universalistic dimensions, many of its problems and propositions are historically specific and thus have to be treated within their own contexts. One cannot "control for" cultural context, as one usually controls for certain variables in order to arrive at general propositions; cultural entities have to be the units upon which comparative studies (in the true sense) will be based.

But our choice of presentation also reflects the way research is currently organized. For example, a collaborative effort between a French- and a German-speaking author is hampered by the fact that, until recently, social research in France and in Germany has largely been conducted without any mutual awareness of developments in the other country. In both nations, there has been a stronger orientation toward the United States than toward their respective neighbors—this is clearly due to the structure of relations between center and periphery. Thus, the country-by-country discussion of research projects is more than a handy way of dividing up the field; it is required by the social reality both of the researchers' object of study and of the research enterprise itself.

The life story approach has been defined above as a method of data collec-

¹ Life story sociologists from about 15 countries met at the 9th World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala (August 14–19, 1978) and again at the 10th World Congress in Mexico (August 16–21, 1982) to exchange information on their research experiences (see Bertaux 1981). They have set up an international network that publishes a newsletter, *Biography and Society* (1983).

tion. More importantly, it is also a specific way of addressing the substantive (i.e. theoretical) questions of sociology. As one of the approaches in the expanding area of interpretive social research, it is not restricted any more—as it was in the United States during the years when the Chicago school predominated—to a single theoretical orientation; rather, it draws from a variety of orientations that range from symbolic interactionism to phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnosociology, structuralism, and cultural variants of Marxism. Accordingly, there is wide variation in the basic questions asked and the methods of data analysis used. Some authors focus on the actors' subjective points of view; others see their task as the reconstruction of meaning structures; still others try to discern social relationships of which the actors themselves are not wholly or even partially aware.

VARIETY OF USES

Working with life stories involves a number of difficult methodological questions for which there are no ready-made answers (Blumer 1979). These questions are being clarified, however, as research projects multiply and the exchange of information between sociologists increases.

Given the variation in basic theoretical orientations and substantive issues, the general feeling among researchers is that no standard procedures will be devised in the near future. Therefore, rather than concentrating on general methodological points and setting up standards to be followed (this would be a futile exercise), we will proceed inductively by discussing the ways of dealing with the methodological problems typically encountered in the studies under review.

Let us comment briefly on three dimensions of variation, however. One important dimension is the sheer number of life stories: Some research projects are based on several hundred, others rely on a single one, and the majority fall somewhere in between. The number depends on whether empirically grounded generalization is being sought or whether one is using a case study approach, where only generalizations based on theoretical plausibility, not statistical induction, are possible. Quite obviously, problems of sampling, analysis, and publication present themselves differently, depending on one's position along this continuum.

Another dimension is the objective/subjective one. While the sociological community usually associates life story research with an orientation toward subjectivity, many contemporary sociologists use this approach to investigate some set of social relationships (e.g. Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981b, Camargo 1981, Kohli et al 1982, Thompson 1983); the same could also be said for some older sociological studies and for most anthropological studies. Many aspects take on a different meaning when examined along this dimension. For

instance, the question of the validity of retrospective data becomes much more important for those sociologists looking for patterns of historically given sociostructural relations than for those studying perceptions, values, definitions of situations, personal goals, and the like. Nevertheless, sociologists with a more subjectivist orientation have to acknowledge the existence of social frames (even if they conceive of them as objectified meaning structures), and those with a more objectivist orientation have to take into account the fact that social structures are the result of sociohistorical processes in which action, and therefore subjectivity, is playing its part. Consequently, advocates of both positions must not only coexist but communicate.

A third dimension may also be identified. An orientation toward academic discourse—implying a constant preoccupation with theoretical abstraction and scientific legitimacy—lies at one end. At the other is a humanistic-literary approach, some of whose advocates place much greater emphasis on the links established during the inquiry between the sociologist and his or her subjects [see for instance Ferrarotti's (1981a,b) plea for *con-ricerca*, i.e. searching together]. Others emphasize the sociologist's role as a "publisher" of life stories aimed at the general public and thus as an advocate of people and groups who would otherwise have no chance to be heard publicly (see Mills 1959; Bertaux 1977; Fuchs 1979; Bennett 1983). For this second group, the issues of rapport, feedback, and readability become crucial.

MAJOR TRENDS

In view of both limitations on the length of this paper and the breadth of the life story revival, our treatment cannot be anything but selective and sketchy. We shall start with the United States; however, given that two excellent books have recently been published on the history and current status of Anglo-American research in this field (Bennett 1981, Plummer 1983), we shall focus primarily on what is happening in other parts of the world.

The United States

Although the spirit of the Chicago school of the 1920s remains alive in symbolic interactionism, the latter's focus on specific situations and organizational contexts has led to a preference for direct observation (and the associated interviews); little attention has been paid to the life story approach. Some recent exceptions to this overall pattern are Garfinkel's (1967) and Bogdan's (1974) studies of transsexuals; Rettig et al's (1977) research on a hard-core heroin addict; Klockars's (1975) examination of a professional fence; Heyl's (1979) study of a madam; Snodgrass's (1982) follow-up of a once famous young delinquent, Clifford Shaw's Jack-Roller; and Strauss & Glaser's (1977) case history of Mrs. Abel, a woman dying of cancer.

But these are exceptions, and they all concentrate, in the Chicago tradition, on forms of deviancy. Bennett's (1981) and Plummer's (1983) books, which present a detailed picture of the American scene, confirm this point. It is only in women's studies, which are not reviewed here, and in Denzin's (1984) recent work that the lives of "ordinary" (i.e. in this context, norm-abiding) people are taken as entities deserving sociological study. Methodologically, the main emphasis in American qualitative sociology is still on direct observation, be it within the theoretical frameworks of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, or urban anthropology (Emerson 1981).

Some of the most interesting American uses of life stories are presently being generated on the border of sociology—for instance, Tamara Hareven's work on the large textile mill of Amoskeag, which closed its doors in 1936. Hareven has used demographic data and archives, as well as the life stories of people who worked in the factory in the 1920s and 1930s, to reconstruct the workers' ways of working and living, and their migratory and familial patterns. [See her two books: *Amoskeag* (with R. Langenbach, 1978), a collection of workers' life stories, and *Family Time and Industrial Time* (1982), an important contribution to family history and social history.] One of Hareven's main findings is that life trajectories cannot be understood without taking into account the inner economies of families whose necessities, as opposed to their members' individual preferences, dictate whether a youngster should go on studying or start working, get married or stay single to help at home, move away or stay in his or her hometown.

Elmer Luchterhand's research—American because of the author's affiliation but concerned with German history—also reaches into the recent past. He is working on a case study of a work camp in Nazi Germany with a high death rate. He has interviewed, despite great difficulties, the people who manned it and the inhabitants of the nearby village who could see columns of prisoners marching between the camp and the worksite everyday. A particularly interesting case is that of a former minister who served as a secretary for three of the commanders of the camp in turn in the midst of extreme role conflicts and who agreed to tell his life story (Luchterhand & Wieland 1981).

Glen Elder's cohort studies should be mentioned here, even though they are not based on life stories as such. The author, a sociologist, artfully mingles sociology, psychology, and history in his research on the long-term effects of the Depression on those who lived through it as children (Elder 1974, 1975, 1981, 1984). He shows how lives are thoroughly shaped by history and how some generations carry the scars of their youth with them throughout their whole lives. He also points out that if, in the same country, adolescence was so different in the 1930s and in the 1960s, a "sociology of adolescence" must take the historical context into account.

Last, but not least, is the work of Norman K. Denzin and the yearbook he

edits, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*. Denzin, himself a longtime defender of the biographical approach, is moving toward a resolutely interpretive standpoint and is developing the links between it and a philosophical background. This effort constitutes a “strategic task,” for the lack of such links has always been symptomatic of sociology’s epistemological naiveté (Denzin 1984).

Poland

Two Polish sociologists of the interwar period—the culturalist Znaniecki and the Marxist Krzywicki—developed an original form of data collection, namely, public competitions soliciting *pamiętniki* (memoirs) as rather topical autobiographies. These competitions were advertised in the local newspapers and their topics varied, from “life as a young peasant” or as “an industrial worker,” for instance, to “the experience of unemployment.” Thousands of written autobiographies were collected in this way. The best were published in the form of books, and some of their authors (often uneducated workers) for a time became the cultural heroes of the Polish intelligentsia (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976, 1981). It seems that insightful sociological analyses were based on these sets of autobiographies, particularly those by Jozef Chalasiński (1981; see also Szczepański 1962 and *Sisyphus—Sociological Studies* 1982); most of this work, however, has never been translated.

After the war, this tradition of organizing public competitions was revived; it is still going on, and the documents are archived in an institute in Warsaw. But sociological interest in this kind of data seems to have died down during the last 20 years. The recent special issue of *Sisyphus* that focuses on “Polish Memoir Sociology” could, however, be a first sign of a revival.

Germany

In Germany—or, more precisely, in the German-speaking areas of Western Europe—interest in the life story approach has been growing especially fast and has almost taken the form of a “biographical movement.” This development may be due to some distinct features of German social reality and social science. German history has been particularly marked during this century—i.e. during the lifetime of today’s older cohorts—by massive disruptions and crises. They include a series of basic changes in political regimes; massive economic deprivation, including food shortages; participation in war, with a high mortality rate for several segments of the population and extensive material destruction; and large-scale migration. The German social sciences, in turn, have a closer affinity than research traditions in other Western cultures to historical and interpretive-hermeneutical conceptions. Works by Dilthey, Freud, Weber, and Schütz have been among the most important resources for the development of present approaches in interpretive sociology.

The growing interest in life stories has developed along two lines. The first

consists of a cultural or life-world approach to Marxism, especially in studies of class consciousness (Bahrdt 1975, Osterland 1978; also Alheit 1983, Brose 1983). The second stems from interpretive research and particularly from the phenomenological tradition (cf Matthes et al 1980), stimulated by an interest in the structure and function of narratives (cf Schütze 1976, 1980; Fischer 1982), and in the life course and socialization (cf Kohli 1978, Rosenmayr 1981).

The two lines of development seem to be moving closer now. On the one hand, the interest in culture and life-worlds found in materialist sociology makes its proponents attentive to the possible contributions of interpretive sociology. On the other hand, attempts have been made to place life-world processes within their structural contexts and to spell out the relations between the two levels, e.g. to conceive of individual interpretations and actions in terms of a selection between structurally given alternatives and an emergent actualization of structurally given patterns. To illustrate, we shall briefly sketch four research programs (for a broader overview, cf Fuchs 1984, Kohli & Robert 1984).

The first is the study by Wolfram Fischer (1982) on time structures and perspectives. Although Fischer's empirical data represent a very special case, i.e. they are biographies of chronically ill patients, he uses them to analyze the social constitution of time within the life-world in general. For biographical research, one key differentiation is between everyday time and life-time. In phenomenological theory, life-time perspectives have been assumed to be mere extensions and summations of short-term (i.e. everyday) perspectives. Fischer argues, however, that it is more appropriate to conceive of them as two structurally distinct time categories. In the social ordering of events and actions within a person's life-time, some features are socially given (heteronomous production), e.g. in the form of institutionalized career sequences, while others are autonomously constituted by the individual. Biographies are global constructions by which individuals constitute a defined present within the specific horizons of the past (retentions) and the future (protentions). Fischer's detailed analysis of these processes reveals some of the intricate structures of the life-world perspective with which any adult deals competently in the course of normal action and which he or she takes for granted—a stance analogous to that found in ethnomethodology.

The second study, which is by Fritz Schütze (1980), is part of the methodological effort to develop the "narrative interview" (see below) and attempts to describe a wide range of structural properties of life-course processes. The emphasis is not so much on the actor's biographical perspectives at the present moment as on historical sequences. While Schütze acknowledges that the global biographical interpretation of the actor continually changes as he or she moves through his or her life—this change is the focus of Fischer's study—he is confident that it is possible to reconstruct the sequence of life-course processes

if one uses an appropriate methodology. Among the issues that Schütze addresses are: the structure of biographical designs and initiatives; the processes whereby episodes that are not originally schematized in a life-time dimension later gain biographical relevance; and the configuration of actions of marked biographical irrelevance (i.e. time off). Special attention is given to the sequential interplay of action and (often painful) compliance with structural constraints—i.e. of autonomous constitution and heteronomous production in Fischer's terms.

The third study, by Wilfried Deppe and Martin Osterland (Deppe 1982, Osterland 1978), should be mentioned here because it was the first instance of biographical research in the Marxist tradition of industrial sociology. The study is based on roughly structured interviews with 161 male German workers from 5 large factories and aims at analyzing their life paths and experiences. The workers were grouped into 3 generations (prewar: year of birth up to 1929; war: born 1930–1939; and postwar: born 1940–1950) and 3 qualification groups (skilled factory workers, skilled craftsmen, and unskilled workers). A third dimension considered was whether they were of urban or rural origin. These groups were essentially treated as single types, without any internal differentiation. The publications based on these data (especially Deppe's dissertation) are rich in life-world information and show that both workers' present situations and their outlooks can only be understood in the context of their biographies.

The fourth study, by Martin Kohli, Joachim Rosenow, and Jürgen Wolf (1983; Kohli 1984), is concerned with aging in the industrial workplace. It addresses two interrelated questions: (a) How is the workers' aging process in the second half of their careers "organized" by the age-specificity of personnel allocation in industrial enterprises? and (b) How do aging workers cope with the problems, risks, and possibilities resulting from this organization? The data are narrative interviews with 54 male German workers in 3 age-groups and 3 qualification groups from 3 large Berlin factories, as well as interviews with various staff members in these firms. Here, age is not an external criterion introduced by the researcher for the purpose of grouping the data; rather, it is the focus of the analysis itself. In contrast to studies of dramatic downward trajectories (Fischer 1982), the topic is "normality"—i.e. the more or less eventful careers of people who are neither particularly underprivileged nor overly successful. The study's theoretical focus is on the impact of the social structure of work on the life-course and on the central role played by socially structured careers and perspectives in the socialization process. Methodologically, it includes both the workers' perspectives and actions, and the context in which they act, thereby minimizing the risk of adopting a subjectivist stance.

The methodological issues involved in life story research have been the focus of much discussion. Data collection is the area where the greatest advances have been made so far. For instance, Schütze has proposed a new form of

interviewing about life-world processes that he calls the narrative interview (Schütze 1980). It is based on linguistic analyses of the structure and efficiency of narration as a specific scheme for referring to events (the other schemes are description and argumentation) (Schütze 1976). Narrations are characterized, among other things, by their temporal ordering of events (i.e. sequences), by their inclusion of references to the past sequence of events as well as a current evaluation of the story, and by an internal structure centering around specific themes, their complication, and their solution.

The narrative interview consists of: (a) a preferably extensive narration by the interviewee/narrator, during which the interviewer restricts his interventions to the minimal hearer utterances required to keep the narration going; and (b) a period of questioning when the interviewer tries to elaborate on the issues presented in the narration and introduces additional topics. There is a standard interview technique, e.g. for finding an adequate stimulus to elicit the primary narration and for presenting the subsequent questions. The interviewer should not ask for arguments (e.g. "Why did you do that?") but for more narrative detail (e.g. "What happened then?" or "Can you remember...?"). If implemented successfully, the narration technique has specific effects, e.g. it evokes more detail than the narrator originally intended or thought he or she would be able to give. Schütze's key thesis is that, given the necessary structural conditions, the narration allows the researcher to reconstruct the real sequence of past events. Although an empirical (as opposed to a theoretical) validation of this thesis is still lacking, most biographical researchers are convinced of the practical usefulness of the narrative method and are trying it out in their studies.

Data analysis, on the other hand, is a more difficult issue. Discussions often center on the question of whether "routines" for analysis comparable to those used in quantitative research may be found—or should be sought. Two approaches aimed at achieving some degree of routinization should be mentioned. First, in narrative interviewing, the analysis starts with a detailed formal analysis of the text structure (somewhat similar to a simplified conversational analysis). Then, there is a step-by-step process of identifying typical cases and relevant theoretical categories that is based on Glaser & Strauss's (1967) propositions.

A second, rather different conception is that of "objective hermeneutics" (Oevermann et al 1979). It is used to explicate the latent or objective meaning structure that ideally motivates an action system, i.e. the ideal rules (or deep structure) that produce an empirically observable set of actions and interpretations. This interesting form of structuralism is as complex theoretically as the methodological procedure that follows from it. Let us point merely to two of its methodological principles: 1. The interpretation must be extensive, identifying *all* possible meanings of a text, even if they are unlikely. This procedure

requires going beyond the text and systematically including any relevant knowledge about the context. 2. The sociological researcher should look for the motive or generating rule for an action in *sociological* terms (i.e. assuming a rational orientation to social goals) as long as possible before invoking any specific psychological disposition of the actor.

Italy and France

In Italy life stories have been used repeatedly in connection with an underlying political objective: to attest publicly how the poor are forced to live [e.g. Revelli's work on poor peasants (1977)]. But shortly after World War II, Franco Ferrarotti, the outstanding figure in life story research in Italy, used life stories as one means of getting to know what was happening to a small, hitherto traditional town where large industrial projects were being developed (Ferrarotti 1973 [1959]). Whenever people voiced complaints about the negative consequences of industrialization (i.e. 20 years before they became commonplace), however, he tended to ignore them, as he himself was carried along by the postwar belief in economic growth. Self-critical reflexion on this personal experience has since made him extremely sensitive to whatever sociological truths may be found under the guise of common speech.

Ferrarotti's present work is on *baraccati*, i.e. people (usually migrants from villages) living in precarious conditions on the outskirts of Rome (Ferrarotti 1974, Ferrarotti et al 1981). He has attempted to merge his role of scholar and his radical political position by proposing, in a short but important volume (Ferrarotti 1981b), *con-ricerca*—i.e. research *with* the people. Some of his main points are taken from Sartre's *Search for a Method* [1960; a French classic somehow comparable to C. W. Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (1959)] and elaborated further. They include: (a) society is thoroughly historical; (b) each person is both unique *and* universal, he or she is a "singular universal"; (c) there are layers of mediations between macrosocial processes and personal lives, e.g. local institutions, families, peer groups; and (d) the simplest unit of social life might not be the individual but the small group (including the family), and therefore, "life histories" of such small groups might be both simpler to grasp and more useful than those of individual people (Ferrarotti 1981a,b).

Other outstanding Italian contributions include Montaldi's studies of marginal people (1961) and of rank and file activists (1971); Luisa Passerini's (1980) analysis of automobile workers' historical consciousness; Tentori & Guidicini's (1974) examination of an old and poor district in the historical center of Bologna; and Capecchi et al's yet unpublished portrayal of the changing patterns of family and work in Bologna. Generally speaking, the many forms that Italian civil society invents to cope with the economic crisis make it a rich ground for developing qualitative studies of this kind. Italian

sociologists' uses of life stories have been reviewed by Campelli (1977), Maciotti (1978), and Ferrarotti (1981b:Appendix).

While Italian intellectual culture is heavily historicist, French culture has been deeply influenced by the huge wave of structuralism that swept through all the social sciences during the 1960s—the most influential works being those by Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault, Lacan, Poulantzas, and Bourdieu. It was not easy for scholars to develop an interest in life stories in such a context. Indeed, one of the first texts published on this subject puts forward the idea that most life lines are broken, i.e. that they do not obey some inner logic but rather are determined from the outside by “the historical movements of sociostructural relationships” (Bertaux 1976:206). According to this author, however, it is precisely for this reason that lives are interesting: By their very forms, life trajectories reveal the constraining effects of the sociostructural relationships that constitute the very object of sociological inquiry for structuralism.

A life story approach has been derived from this structuralist standpoint. Topical life stories, it is argued, should be collected in a single milieu with a focus on “practices,” not on perceptions or feelings. The sociologist's task is to infer from recurrent practices the pattern of sociostructural relationships that are generating or constraining them. For instance, given a set of life courses within a certain profession, one should be able to infer information about the workings of its internal labor markets; or one should be able to learn about the detailed relations of production within a trade from collecting data about the work lives of the people within it. Key informants who know the milieu from the inside may be able to accelerate the process of gaining sociological understanding. This “ethnosociological” approach has been put to work in an inquiry on artisanal bakeries, which still produce and sell about 90% of the bread eaten in France—a rather unique case in a developed industrial country (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981a,b; Bertaux-Wiame 1982).

The key methodological point of this research is the rediscovery of the process of *saturation* by which the members of a research team move from case to case, modifying their questions along the way and enriching and correcting their mental picture of the social processes under study. They eventually reach a point beyond which every new case merely confirms the validity of the sociological interpretation. This process of saturation, which not only requires a search for “negative cases” (Lindesmith 1947) but also a good deal of sociological thinking, is therefore the key to generalization. As such, it stands in the same relation to ethnosociological research as random sampling does to survey research. Glaser & Strauss (1967) described this process long ago, but its central importance has usually been overlooked (as in Blumer 1979 or Plummer 1983).

Other studies following an ethnosociological approach, but not reaching the point of saturation, have been done on migrants to the cities (Barbichon et al

1974, Bertaux-Wiame 1979); working-class families (Destray 1971, Pitrou 1978) and activists (Peneff 1979); Algerian migrants' families (Sayad 1979); and single mothers (Lefaucheur & Le Drian 1980). Two groups of scholars are working independently on an ethnosociology of Jewish communities in France, with a historical dimension added (Bensimon 1980; Schnapper 1980). In Nice the anthropologist J. Poirier and the social psychologist S. Clapier-Valladon (1980, 1983) are developing the concept of ethnobiography.

In Geneva, C. Lalive d'Épinay and his team (1983) have extensively studied the problem of coping with retirement and aging in various social milieux, using both survey data and narrative interviews. Career questionnaires and life stories have also been combined in a study on retired Parisians (Cribier 1983, Rhein 1980).

The work of Maurizio Catani follows another line of thought. He is interested in values, and especially in the values of migrants, whether they are foreign-born like himself or urban people from peasant origins. He works with one person at a time, collecting his or her life story through repeated interviews. His method of analysis consists of looking for the meanings hidden in the narratives—not only in their content, but also in their very form (see Catani 1981 and Catani & Mazé 1982, a book about the life and world view of an old woman of rural origins). The interviews, complete with the questions used and information about the context, are given *in extenso*.

Martine Burgos's work is another example of a sociolinguistic approach. Her starting point is Mikhail Bakhtine's distinction between epic and "romanesque" forms of narration. In the epic form, the world and personages are taken as given and basically do not change; life, as in the *Odyssey*, is an adventure. In the romanesque form—whose ideal type is the *Bildungsroman* that describes a process of self-discovery, e.g. *Crime and Punishment*—the world is problematic, the self is unstable, life (and the life story) takes the shape of a search for meaning and identity. Burgos examines how these forms coexist with, interfere in, or dominate the life narratives of old peasant women (Burgos 1980). Lastly, the work on autobiographies by P. Lejeune (1980), a professor of literature, has stimulated interest not only among his colleagues, but also among sociologists and linguists (Delhez-Sarlet & Catani 1983).

Britain

Owing to a shortage of space, the reader is referred to the recent, excellent, and quite exhaustive book by Kenneth Plummer (1983) on the use of life stories in the Anglo-Saxon world. We shall only mention here two works using an ethnosociological orientation, namely Raphael Samuel's (1981) study of a former criminal in London and Paul Thompson's (1983) examination of fishing communities.

It took Samuel years to extract from Mr. Arthur Harding memories about his youth in the Iago, a district of London once famous for its high density of criminal activity. In fact, Harding had sent a publisher a poorly written autobiography intended to convince the reader that he had been a victim of police harassment all along; this is how Samuel got to know him. Working with Harding prompted Samuel, a radical sociologist and historian, to reflect about what a class society defines as crime (Samuel 1981:Appendix). This use of a life story to stimulate the sociological imagination exemplifies one of the possible solutions to the problem of life story "analysis."

Paul Thompson's study of fishing communities in Scotland demonstrates that not only does the economy exert a determining influence upon culture, but that the opposite is true as well. Fishing is an activity that requires adaptability, initiative, and hence personal autonomy. Some local cultures, as embodied for example in the relations between men and women and in child-rearing practices, promote the development of autonomy; this is the case in the Shetlands. Thompson has observed that Shetlanders have been able to adapt to the new fishing conditions and relates it to their culture. In contrast, both the fishermen of another island characterized by a very rigid form of Protestantism and sexism, and the industrial fishing industry of Aberdeen, which is marked by a sharp class distinction between boat owners and sailors, have failed to adapt. This research is a fine example of how one can move from concrete life stories to fundamental sociological issues.

Spain

Born in Spain, the sociologist Juan F. Marsal worked for years on Spanish immigration into Argentina and emigration back to the home country. Inspired by Thomas & Znaniecki's example, he succeeded in persuading one of his informants, J. S., to write his own autobiography. The result is a moving book that tells the sad story of a man born in poverty in a Spanish village, who enlisted in the colonial army, got married, and then was pushed by his wife (who stayed home) into migrating to Argentina. He worked there in various trades before becoming a traveling photographer, never making much money. After 20 years in Argentina, he came back to Spain as poor as when he left and was ostracized by his own wife and daughter. As Marsal (1972:3) says about the great drama of the return of emigrants to their homelands, "what is common to all greatly exceeds what is particular to each of them," which is another way of stating that each human being is a universal, albeit a singular one (Sartre 1960).

Two of Marsal's students have followed in his footsteps, using life stories to study both the formation of strong regionalist (Catalan) attitudes in spite of harsh repression by the Franco regime and the trajectory of Catalan intellectuals (Hernández 1982, Mercadé 1982).

Latin America

Life stories are being put to a multiplicity of uses in Latin America, which has its own distinct cultural identity. Aspasia Camargo and two colleagues have reviewed this subject in a paper presented at the 10th World Congress of Sociology (Camargo et al 1982). Once again, for reasons of space we will refer the reader to this paper and mention only the main tendencies and a few outstanding works.

We single out three large projects because of their sociological relevance. The first has been carried out on a continuous basis since 1975 at the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação of the Fundação Getulio Vargas in Rio de Janeiro. Its aim is to retrace the history of Brazilian elites from the 1930s to 1964 (when the military seized power) and to analyze this group sociologically. Members of this Center have been conducting repeated interviews with retired political leaders, generals, and businessmen who played a major role during this period. The interviews are transcribed and kept as oral archives. Together with other data, they are also used as source materials for a sociological analysis of the processes of elite recruitment, formation of cliques, internal division of elites, policymaking, and the like (Camargo 1981). Some of the interviews have been turned into successful books (e.g. Camargo & Goes 1981). The project has been going on for several years and is still evolving; we know of no other comparable endeavor anywhere. The Center's data bank now forms the basis for numerous specialized research projects.

Another important set of projects is being conducted in Mexico by the Oral History Department of the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Meyer 1978). One of these was started in 1959 with interviews of former leaders of the Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata movements during the Mexican Revolution of 1910; since 1972 the focus has shifted to rank-and-file activists (Villa 1982). Participants in another important Department project have examined political exile and its consequences by interviewing refugees from the Spanish Civil War (Alonso & Baranda 1980; on this topic see also de Oliveira Costa et al 1980 on Brazilian women in political exile). Other projects include studies of the history of the Mexican movie industry and of the medical profession.

A third outstanding example of work with life stories is the series of studies by Jorge Balan and Elizabeth Jelin, now at CEDES (Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad) in Buenos Aires. During several years at the University of Texas at Austin in the late 1960s, Balan and Jelin, together with the demographer Harlan Browning, conducted a survey using biographical questionnaires (the first of its kind) on the industrial town of Monterrey in northern Mexico. Their data enabled them to map out the life trajectories of migrants from rural areas who moved to the city and tried to find their way into its markets (Balan et al 1971). When they returned to Argentina, Balan and Jelin maintained an interest in biographies, published methodological studies on the subject (Jelin

1976), and carried out empirical research on the ways of life of the urban poor. In contrast to Oscar Lewis, who did not pay much attention to governmental policies, they have been able to trace the effects that changing policies have on the urban working class's way of life by studying how families cope with problems of housing, health, education, and lack of resources (Balan & Jelin 1980).

Quebec

For a long time, the Québécois have been oppressed economically, politically, and culturally. Like all oppressed minorities, they have maintained a separate identity through their culture, and particularly through their language and Church. During the 1960s, the country underwent a very rapid and all encompassing process of modernization known as "la révolution tranquille." In the early 1970s, a large and pioneering research project was launched under the initiative of Fernand Dumont to see how the Québécois had lived through and participated in this fundamental process of social change. A total of 150 life stories focusing on individuals' lived experiences were collected from members of all social strata.

Nicole Gagnon (1980, 1981) has directed the process of analyzing these data. The main concepts she uses are, not unexpectedly, culture and identity; but these are interpreted in an original manner. Culture is seen as a collective praxis resulting from the actions of people who are dealing with continuity and change and trying to maintain or reinforce an identity at both the individual and the collective level. Identity is seen as "a process of symbolic appropriation of reality" through which people move subjectively from passivity to activity. Thus defined, these two concepts open the way for a sophisticated analysis of the collective cultural dynamics whose effects show up in the life stories. (See also Houle 1979 and Pineau 1983; the second work deals with the general topic of self-teaching and self-transformation through the particular case of a young woman whose autobiography is included in the volume.)

LINKS WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES

Lives are totalities, even if broken ones. They develop simultaneously at several levels: the historical, the societal, the ethnosocial, the personal (C. W. Mills was particularly sensitive to this; see Mills 1959). Thus, it is no wonder that other disciplines besides sociology are interested in them.

Life stories are narratives; as such, they are undergirded by the inner structure of narrative discourse—a topic that has been studied in *linguistics*. Scholars who are closely analyzing life stories have therefore developed an interest in the possibilities and constraints that the narrative structure imposes on discourse. Most of the sociolinguistic work done on life stories bears on this

question (e.g. Schütze 1976, 1980; Faris 1980; Catani 1981; Catani & Mazé 1982; Cohler 1982; Kaplan 1982). But within the overall narrative form various types of narration may exist, each of which expresses the basic relationship of the narrator to the world; this is the question Grele (1979), Burgos (1980), and Bennett (1981) address. Types of relationships to the world do not merely reflect personality types but also social categories; to take an extreme example, working-class women who have spent their lives in the traditional housewife role do not tell their life stories in the same way that men in elite groups do (Bertaux-Wiame 1979).

Links with *historians* are now being built through a particular, quickly growing branch of this discipline, namely oral history. This expression refers to the works of those historians who study the twentieth century by using oral histories in the form of long interviews or (usually focused) life stories as one of their sources (Thompson 1975, 1978). While oral accounts appear to be of limited value in constructing a history of events, they provide considerable information on subcultures (e.g. life-styles, patterns of conduct, values) among elites or, conversely, among the rural or urban working classes. Social processes among both of these groups only leave a scant written record for future social historians—although for different reasons. The use of oral sources has led social historians to turn to sociology not only for methods of interviewing but for concepts as well. Thus, a clear pattern of convergence—exemplified in cross-references, joint conferences, and research projects—is visible. [On this subject, see the journals *Oral History* (Colchester, Essex) and *International Journal of Oral History* (New York); see also Thompson 1975, 1982; Revelli 1977; Niethammer 1980; Passerini 1980; Samuel 1981.]

Within *psychology*, interest in the biographical approach has been spurred by issues of development, especially development across the whole life-span (Bühler 1933, Thomae 1952, White 1952). With the growing psychometric emphasis of mainstream developmental psychology, the use of life stories became largely restricted to psychodynamic approaches (e.g. Erikson 1958, Levinson et al 1978). Recently, however, interest seems to be broadening again, as Cohler's (1982) overview demonstrates. Two interesting, special approaches are the study of the lives of exceptional men (Runyan 1982), following the path opened by Erikson (1958), and the use of reminiscence as a therapeutic intervention technique with older people, following Butler's (1963) arguments on the life-review.

Anthropology, of course, has a very long record of life story works (Langness 1965, Langness & Frank 1981). Oscar Lewis's (1961) and Sidney Mintz's (1960) books have probably had a greater influence than *The Polish Peasant* on the present revival of interest in life stories. Nevertheless, the trend toward scientism has now reached this discipline, and it seems that life stories are no longer fashionable. This change represents a great loss, as Morin (1982) has

shown convincingly for French anthropology. Mandelbaum's (1973) and Freeman's (1979) works seem to be exceptions to this general trend.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, himself a promoter of scientism in anthropology, once acknowledged the particular quality of life stories: They allow one to perceive a foreign culture from within, as a living whole, rather than as a set of seemingly conflicting norms, values, roles, rituals, and the like (Lévi-Strauss 1943). An important extension of this remark is that, in addition to their analytical potential which involves difficult methodological questions, life stories possess a synthetic power. One often gets the impression from reading one of the famous "native autobiographies" (e.g. Simmons 1942) that "everything is there." In other words, in addition to expressing everything about a given culture that a treatise should, its parts (that is, the chapters of the treatise) are once again put together to form a "living whole." This represents the synthetic moment; but one should be aware that it only comes after the analytic one. Behind every native autobiography there is an anthropologist who asked questions that were later erased: behind the children of Sanchez's speech is Oscar Lewis's searching mind; behind Arthur Harding's words is Raphael Samuel's relentless probing. Thus, the synthetic potential of the life story expresses itself only through the analytic skill of the researcher. And if some life stories possess an artistic quality, this is not a sign that they are prescientific, but on the contrary, that they have moved beyond the analytic stage (Bertaux 1977).

CONCLUSION

The revival of sociologists' interest in life stories is in itself an intriguing social phenomenon that calls for more detailed analysis (cf Kohli 1981a). Its future cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, we hope to have shown that it is not a superficial trend. It is often said that the previous failure of the life story approach was mainly due to its own weaknesses. There *were* some weaknesses, but this is always true of any sociological method. What needs to be explained is why, instead of working to eliminate them, sociologists turned their backs on the method altogether. The failure of the method was not an isolated phenomenon; it suffered the same fate as the whole Chicago tradition, which encompassed more than just the life story method and which was marginalized when survey research became the dominant paradigm.

The present situation differs strikingly in two respects. First, the future of the method is not tied to the fate of a particular "theory group." Second, survey research is no longer the exciting innovation attracting the *forces vives* of the profession; rather, it is an established and respectable tradition whose usefulness is undeniable, but whose claim for hegemony is now being questioned. Thus, the current situation is quite open. The eventual fate of the method's

revival is yet to be determined. In our opinion, it does not depend so much on methodological advances as on whether research projects are carried out in the years to come that can be used as exemplary works.

Even if such works do appear, however, their quality may be attributed not to the approach used, but to the personal skills of the scholar. This assertion has already been made about Oscar Lewis's works, for instance. Therefore, it is necessary to recall that sociological inquiry is also a matter of skill. Science has become so bureaucratized that one tends to forget the extremely important fact that the process of discovery always requires some personal skill; using nonformalized methods only makes this more visible. Survey research always brings with it some information, even in the absence of sociological theorization (as in public opinion surveys); but research based on life stories or other kinds of "nonquantitative" data always requires some sociological thinking to make sense. It will always necessitate some skill—this is its challenge. So while it is true that sociological interpretations based on life stories require special skills, we do not believe that this is a sign of the nonscientific nature of the method—quite the contrary. Of course, it is necessary to find ways of controlling the interpretation of data, e.g. through extensive discussions in the scientific community or through feedback from the actors in the social process under study. But the problem of validating interpretations is not specific to the life story approach; it lies at the core of interpretive research.

To conclude, there has been a multiple "renaissance" in the use of life stories; this is why one should not expect the elaboration of a standard methodology. One should not expect the emergence of a new theoretical school either. The value of the life story movement lies elsewhere: the perspective it implies allows one to take a new look at old questions (e.g. aging, social mobility, migration, elites, marginality, or social movements); to open new fields (especially at the level of symbolic processes, e.g. life-long meaning construction); and to explore new approaches (e.g. through the implementation of hermeneutics within a sociological, not a philosophical, framework or through the implementation of an ethnographic approach to the study of sociological, not anthropological, questions). Above all, it constrains researchers to pay attention to the various levels of social life, to become sensitive to the weight of history, and to conceive of the present as history in the making. In short, it is highly challenging. Herein lies its fragility; herein lies its strength.

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