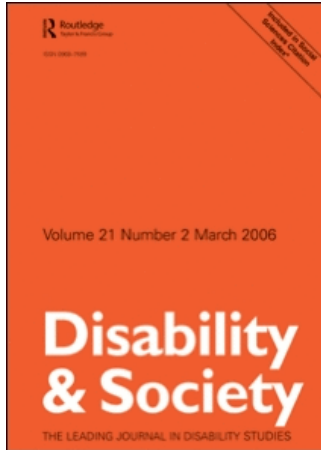


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# Tales of Hidden Lives: a critical examination of life history research with people who have learning difficulties

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores the use of life history research with people who have learning difficulties. [1] A number of strengths and weaknesses associated with the life history as a method of imparting life experiences are examined. Particular emphasis is given to the dilemmas that researchers may face in explicating the life histories of informants labelled as having learning difficulties. With reference to literature on narrative-based research and by drawing upon my own research experiences, I will argue that life histories reaffirm the personal in social theorising, whilst providing a methodology in which individual and social worlds may be drawn together. In addition, eliciting life histories may promote a vivid sense of the research process, thus demystifying the often over technical and jargonised nature of social scientific study. On the down-side, I will suggest that images of the ‘imaginative researcher’ and ‘articulate informant’ portrayed in much life history literature, threaten to stifle researchers’ concerns with the inclusion of people with learning difficulties. Furthermore, I will draw attention to dilemmas that arise in making links between an individual’s life history and social theory. Finally, problems relating to issues of bias and power are explored. In research involving people with learning difficulties, it is concluded that life histories cogently expose the experiences of people so-labelled and therefore deserve further usage albeit with critical assessment.*

## Introduction

Although a current resurgence of interest in biographical methods has been identified (Bowker 1993), the utilisation of life stories and other human documents as research tools in the social sciences has a long history. In the field of learning difficulties, however, life history research has received relatively sparse interest. An intensive literature review by Whittemore *et al.* (1986) reveals a tradition rich in the beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of parents, carers and professionals with the perspectives of people with learning difficulties seemingly left unrepresented. According to Turner (1980) absent insider stories of people with learning difficulties reflects a general pervasive assumption that such people are unable to articulate their

own life experiences. Whilst accepting such prejudices exist and noting the bias towards the accounts of significant others (particularly parents), it is important that we do not ignore a body of research that has embraced the viewpoints of people with learning difficulties. Early examples of such accounts include *The World of Nigel Hunt* (Hunt, 1967), Robert Edgerton's (1967) *The Cloak of Competence*, Braginsky & Braginsky's (1971) *Hansels and Gretels* and the well known *Tongue Tied* account by Joey Deacon (1974). More recently, Fido & Potts (1989) cite the personal accounts of people who have been institutionalised, while Lea (1988) refutes pathologising clinical definitions via the poetry of people defined by such criteria. Booth & Booth's (1994) *Parenting under Pressure* explores the personal stories of parents with learning difficulties, whilst Atkinson & Williams' (1990) '*Know Me As I Am*' is perhaps the most explicit presentation of the writings and artwork of this labelled group. All in all, these writings remind us of the lives that exist behind a label. One paper particularly illuminates issues in the use of the life history method, namely, Bogdan & Taylor's (1976) 'The Judged not the Judges—An Insider's Perspective of Mental Retardation' in which the story of Ed is presented. This may be cited as a seminal paper from which followed much research (some mentioned above) focusing on the lived realities of people so-labelled. I will be coming back to this particular paper, along with my own research experiences, throughout my examination of the life history.

As narrative methods become increasingly in vogue, then it is inevitable that they will be used by researchers interested in the experiences of people with learning difficulties. Whilst I acknowledge that this may and should be seen as a positive step forward in the contemporary atmosphere of empowering research, blind acceptance of any methodology may bring with it dangerous implications. Critical examination is imperative. In this paper I identify a number of strengths and weaknesses of the life history when used with informants with learning difficulties.

## Considering Strengths of Life History Research

### *The Personal Nature of Life Histories*

Proponents assert that the major strength of the life history approach lies in its attention to insider perspectives. In the 1920's, Thomas and Znaniecki (1918–20) claimed that biographical materials constituted the 'perfect type of sociological material' (cited in Plummer, 1983, p. 64). Whilst I would not take such a radical position, I intend to argue that life histories do exist as an agency through which historically marginalised individuals may account for their own lives. Following Thompson (1988, p. 2), life histories may be viewed as a resource for transforming historical understanding and analysis. Here, a central place is given back to the people who made and experienced history, thus re-addressing their previous absence in dominant (and elitist) historical documentation. Providing a context for life histories:

gives history back to people in their own words. And in giving them a past, it also helps them towards a future. (Thompson, 1988, p. 265.)

The life history approach may also be seen as constituting a more favourable epistemological standpoint with respect to social understanding. Following Plummer (1983, p. 6) and Nisbet (1976, p. 21), a radical stance views the 'objective' methods of positivist social science as merely allowing the description of social phenomena, whilst failing to provide for their understanding. The life history on the other hand is presented as an approach which allows for the explanation of social phenomena. Thompson (1988, p. 7–8) proposes a major resource of life history research lies in its ability to clearly access the lived realities and social worlds of informants. Shaw's (1931) analysis elaborates further;

more than through any other social science approach, the life history enables us to know people intimately, to see the world through their eyes, and to enter into their experiences vicariously. (cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 81.)

Thus, the invitation to re-examine our preconceptions of another is prompted by the personal nature of a story, and the intimacy of the life history invites readers into another's world. Whereas tellers of 'official' documents strive for objectivity, the life history, as with any human document, is thoroughly personal (Stott, 1973, p. 7). We understand an official document intellectually, yet the human document is comprehended emotionally. Empathy accompanies insight—we know another's life because we feel it. As the informal, anecdotal and personalised elements of a story are internalised, then I would argue that these very qualities provide a direct route to social understanding. The phenomenological bases of this approach (re)cast light on the understandings we hold of individuals and their groups. Whilst narrative methods have received such contemporary popularity in view of growing post-modernist theory, the use of the life history (amongst others) does combat another more general growing frustration with the 'disappearing individual' in social theory (Whittemore *et al.*, 1986). Reinforcing the insider's subjective understandings of their own position prompts readers to challenge their own (often generalised) understandings of the tellers. In short our own 'truths' are quickly challenged by the personal narrative. Take the words of an informant with learning difficulties that I have spoken to: 'Why do people have to tell me what I have to do and what I haven't to do?'

From a single sentence, extracted from the larger story, this remark challenges the general assumption that the views of people with learning difficulties do not exist (Atkinson & Williams, 1990, p. 8). In turn, we feel a person's thoughts on 'societal oppression' (broken free of grand theoretical narrative) and their active questioning of their environment. Moreover, this voice of dissent starts to lead us away from beliefs that 'people who know no better life wish for no better life' (*ibid.*).

Another demonstration of the power of the personal can be found in Bogdan & Taylor's (1976) life story of a person labelled as mentally retarded. This story reminds us of the individual(s) behind the labels. Attention is drawn to our own assumptions and prejudices as we see Ed and his social world emerging through his

story, consequently encouraging a move away from generalised and pathological concepts of mental retardation to insights which are immersed within (and emerge from) a personalised account:

differences take on less importance. The person's own words force us to think of subjects as people, and categories of all kinds become less relevant. (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976, p. 52.)

Story-telling is an ancient and by all accounts universal phenomenon (Bruner, 1987, p. 16). Adopting the life history approach taps into a huge source of available data—we are all tellers of stories, though we will vary in the way that we tell them. Stories appeal to our own positions in life resonating as another's story collides with our own. As readers our own lives will provide the most immediate and natural framework for understanding the life of the informant (Frank, 1979). Through promoting empathy, emotion and feeling in the reader, the life history approach directly affirms the subjective meanings held by the informant and opens up the social worlds that they inhabit.

#### *The Life History as a Context for Combining Social and Individual Worlds*

Attempts to combine social and individual perspectives can be found throughout the history of the social sciences. In psychology, we may cite theorists within the Frankfurt School (blossoming in the 1920–30s) as pioneers in attempting to combine social theory (Marx) and individual theory (Freud). Similar tensions have existed within sociology as writers are encouraged to move from deterministic sociological understanding to considerations of the individual. Plummer (1983, pp. 52–54) notes that social theory has continually gravitated between reified concepts of social structure (epitomised within positivist ideas of social order) and solipsistic notions of mind (as in the case of post-modernist social theory). Closing the gap between the individual and the social order remains a constant source of debate. Attempts by social theorists to combine the social and individual have been attacked on the grounds that they are over-theoretical, are often riddled with jargon and, in some cases, may be simply wrong. On the latter point a criticism is directed at social theory that fails to 'ring true'. Schutz (1964) takes a radical position here and suggests that certain theories flounder when they fail to adequately immerse themselves within the worlds of those that they attempt to understand. An inadequate theory, then, may only be a 'a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer' (*ibid.*).

The life history, on the other hand, has been appreciated as a more direct, less-jargonised and insightful method of representing the individual (our story-tellers) and society (Whittemore *et al.*, 1986, p. 8). Corradi (1991, p. 106) asserts that explanations of the interaction between the individual and the social world are instantly provided by the life history. Stories not only present the subjective definition of a situation, as accounted for by their tellers, but they also highlight the

social constraints upon each individual. I feel that this clarity is shown in the following extract from an informant that I spoke to;

these lads put me in the toilets and made me take me shoes and socks off, and made me show me six toes.... I didn't want to and they made me do it...they even put cigarette marks on me. Those supervisors just left me to be bullied and that's why I couldn't tell no one...no one would believe me.

Even in raw form, a simple transcription, this informant's words instantly reflect society's treatment of people with learning difficulties. For Bertaux (1981, p. 36), when these stories take the form of a life history, the underlying sociocultural relationships of a person's life are clearly disclosed. We hear the personal reminiscences of the storyteller and at the same time are drawn to the broader structural horizons which function as backgrounds to the narrative—permeating private lives (Bertaux-Wiame, 1981, p. 261). In short the life history provides a link between public and private worlds, giving substance to the social worlds of the tellers—social worlds which are often concealed and mystified by social scientific jargon. Moreover, a person's story reminds us of the fluidity of individual experiences, something often lost in grand social theory, enticing the reader into an examination of the constantly changing nature of individual and social reality;

experience is a stream, a flow; social structures are seamless webs of criss-crossing negotiations; biographies are in a constant state of becoming and as they evolve so their subjective accounts evolve. (Plummer, 1983, p. 55.)

Hence, the story clearly elicits, and I believe that to be an important quality, the fluctuating social background of the teller. Narrative invites understandings which are moving, ever-changing and flexible—just like the stories we hear every day. In addition, the life history challenges a dominant belief held about people with learning difficulties—namely, that 'these people' form a homogeneous population—'they are all the same':

It is individual life courses which...highlight the heterogeneity of individual appearance, residential history, past employment or prospects for work, emotional response to personal limitation or adversity,...thus for the similarity of past events that may be found in the lives of the retarded, the life history can inform us of the highly variable manner in which the retarded have responded to these crucial life events. (Whittemore *et al.*, 1986, p. 14.)

Through acknowledging the variability of experience as shown by life histories, as researchers we are making a simple, but necessary step towards empowering our tellers. In recognising the individual aspects of a life, we reaffirm the individuality of the informant. Understandings which (over)emphasise the structural bases of oppression may seriously undermine the dignity of individuals making up that oppressed group. The life history approach, due to its early emphasis on subjectivity, suggests that we should suspend (or at least pull back from) interpretations that

instantly move to a macroperspective. Thus, at one and the same time, Ed's story (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976), reminds of the strength of human resilience in the face of discrimination whilst exposing the 'powerful ideological monopolies' (*ibid.*, p. 51) that constrain and subordinate him. Therefore, from Ed's story we see that institutionalisation is:

a function of a variety of social and economic contingencies—family difficulties, lack of alternatives—more than the nature of the person's disability or treatment needs. (*ibid.*)

However, at the very same time we are also shown that these structural relations have not completely hindered Ed's strength and resilience:

I wish they could see me now. I wonder what they'd say if they could see me holding down a regular job and doing all kinds of things. I bet they wouldn't believe it. (*ibid.*)

As a method for eliciting both individual and social worlds, the life history provides a bridge between the informant's own life and the general culture of his or her social group. To do so in such a direct and personal manner allows the reader to feel and think of the person's story and the society against which it stands.

#### *Collecting Life Histories—the vivid sense of research(er) experience*

The personal qualities of the life history, its commitment to subjectivity and its challenge to abstract (positivist) notions of self and society, has primed many researchers within the field to consider their own roles. This often goes under the title of 'researcher reflexivity'. Contemporary celebrations of researcher reflexivity are not as new and ground-breaking as some theorists would have us believe. Stott (1973, pp. 152–153) observes that reflections on the research process are closely connected to the Chicago School tradition in sociology. Warner & Lunt (1941, pp. 5–6), for example, took pains to ensure the reader gained what John Dollard called 'a vivid sense of the research experience'. Furthermore, feminist uses of biographical methods have strengthened calls for honest appraisals of the researcher's role (e.g. Stanley, 1990; Harrison & Stina Lyon, 1993).

The particularly intimate experience of obtaining someone's life history elicits numerous issues associated with the researcher's role. To examine these issues many life history researchers have therefore tried to demystify their research. Tony Parker perhaps provides the most radical stance in introducing his 1963 book *The Unknown Citizen*: 'This is an unscientific study by an untrained observer of an insufficiently understood problem'.

Although the majority of proponents of life history research would hesitate in taking such a humble position, reflection is upheld as a necessary part of the research exercise. Broadly speaking, two aspects of this challenge may be identified: first, reflections on the role of the researcher when life stories are collected; secondly, reflections on the researcher's role in writing up and presenting the life stories. I

would suggest that these considerations become even more important when our informants have learning difficulties.

First, the way researchers are perceived by (potential) informants will have an impact on the collection of life histories. I do not feel that it is a controversial to suggest that all researchers should enquire exactly how their informants see them. For those involving people with learning difficulties, however, a common perception may emerge. Jan Walmsley (1993, p. 42) observes that is highly likely for informants to place researchers in the ranks of professionals. From my own experience I have been spoken of as that 'nosy student'—a highly undesirable perception however correct it may be! These do not leave us with insurmountable difficulties. After all the exploration of such possible perceptions may actually strengthen the research and the life histories that emerge. Tremblay (1959), amongst others, observes that attention to informants' understandings validates both the research process and the researcher's role. This need for reflection on the research process is further highlighted in my own field notes following one interview:

I fired lots of quick, impatient questions at Matt [pseudonym]—he said that he felt 'grilled like a tomato'! On listening to the tape I became increasingly aware of how impatient I had been. Silence is golden—unsurprisingly shutting up let Matt speak! Time to think over questions is something that most interviewers would allow for—so why didn't I? Nerves? Uncertainty? Literature on interviewing people with learning difficulties suggests direct, snappy and quick questions are better but this assumes that all interviewees with learning difficulties are the same—they're not!

Thus, researchers need to also confront their own perceptions of informants, if unfair, they may hinder the research process. Being sensitive to both our informants and our own feelings, perceptions and speech will make us more able to hear their stories.

Secondly, researcher awareness is linked to issues of 'contamination' (Plummer, 1983, p. 113). Thompson (1988, p. 230) notes that the translation of speech into prose instantly mutilates the story being recanted. Take the following extract of an interview from my own research:

Q[me]: So...in ten years time how do you think you'll be feeling?

A[informant]: The same.

Q: The same as what?

A: The same as what I am now.

Q: And how do you feel today?

A: I just take it as it is.

Q: Is it good or bad?

A: I don't feel bad.

Q: Do you feel it's good?

A: No in the middle.

I feel that the written form of this extract fails to convey the reality of the interview.

My approach around this point in the interview was directive. The informant had taken a very thoughtful approach throughout our meetings, but in this extract it would seem that his responsiveness is limited. This is simply unfair as his responses became stifled by my efforts to move on. Converted to prose the reader does not get a picture of the speed of the interaction (it was actually very protracted) and there is no indication of the time taken by the informant or myself in considering questions/responses (the informant was thoughtful, I was over-eager). For interviews in general, the act of transcription instantly fails to afford the reader a clear feel for the interaction.

Moreover, the issue of contamination increases in complexity when the researcher writes the informant's story. With respect to the above interview extract would it be fair for me to write the following?

I just see the future as it is today—neither good nor bad. I don't see things changing for the better or worse.

Plummer (1983, p. 113) argues that researchers using life histories can legitimately move from little or no contamination (in cases where informants' pure and raw accounts are presented) through to accounts where the researcher's hand is dominant in (re)presenting stories of inarticulate subjects (in the case of my attempt above)—as long as this contamination is acknowledged. For the researcher involved with people with learning difficulties, who due to a number of social (and individual) reasons will lack articulation, increased concerns over contamination will be felt. The diachronic collection of any life history, although losing pure informant introspection, nonetheless, does invite greater researcher awareness and accountability—something sadly lacking in other methodologies.

Researcher awareness is a necessary part of any methodological approach that purports to be empowering. Indeed, I would assert that life history research can lay claims to giving a voice to people with learning difficulties in a particularly cogent way when the voice of the researcher is also heard. To acknowledge the pen of the researcher in the writing of life histories does not detract from the potency of the narrative, rather it excavates many issues of power that are often submerged amongst the rhetoric of 'empowerment'.

### **Considering Weaknesses of Life History Research**

Major methodological and theoretical discrepancies have been identified within the life history method. Often challenges, originating from alternative social science perspectives, are in many ways objections to aspects of the life history which its proponents identify as strengths. For example, whereas the positivist may pinpoint the lack of a representative sample as a major limitation, the life historian perceives their attention to individual stories as transcending such de-personalised criticisms. As Bruner (1987, p. 14) observes, the necessary quality of stories is their notable instability, reflecting an epistemological commitment to the fluidity of subjective meaning. Even on accepting the strengths of the life history approach a number of dilemmas do emerge. Three will be addressed.

*Life Histories and the (Un)imaginative Researcher*

The proposition of moving from abstract theory to insider perspectives has set the life history researcher an unenviable task. Sacrifices may have to be made. Hollway (1989) highlights the trepidation that may afflict the inexperienced researcher on entering a context conspicuous by the absence of standard research practice. This anxiety is increased, and I am referring here to my own feelings, when the prospective life history researcher surveys the related literature. Generally, the literature presents the researcher as someone needing both imagination and resoluteness. For example 'It is perhaps to the tools of the novelist, the poet and the artist that the social scientists should turn' (Plummer, 1983, p. 106). Grand designs indeed! Yet if the role of the researcher implies 'listening beyond' the words of our informants and tapping into 'the speech of a social culture' (Bertaux-Wiame, 1981, p. 260) then the role is definitely a challenging one. The most powerful of life stories would seem to tap into grander ideas of creativity;

It is not only through the facts and opinions given, but perhaps through the imaginative and narrative skills with which they are put together, that we perceive the speaker's deeper historical consciousness. (Thompson, 1988, p. 242.)

Is it no surprise, therefore, that life history research was submerged under a tide of quantitative methods which asked less of the researcher? Even if these skills were acquired a further problem presents itself. Plummer (1983, p. 90) is clear on which responsibilities lie with the informant in the production of life histories: 'the subject should be fairly articulate, [and] able to verbalise'.

The picture that emerges sees the researcher being placed in the role of creative writer with the informant assuming a role of coherent narrator. Such assumptions, however, fail to account for life history research involving inarticulate subjects—a banner under which we may place (some) people with learning difficulties. For example how would Plummer deal with the following (taken from my own research):

*Q*[me]: Well, what I would like you to do is to tell me some experiences and things that have happened in your life?

*A*[Informant]: Experiences?

*Q*: Yeah, experiences—things that have happened in your life.

*A*: I don't know if I've got any.

*Q*: Well let me explain—you tell me about some things that have happened to you in your life, good or bad.

*A*: Good or bad?

*Q*: Can you tell me something that happened in your life that is good.

*A*: Good?

*Q*: Yeah, something you have nice memories of.

*A*: [Silence].

*Q*: Birthdays?

*A*: [Silence]

The failure to consider the importance of inarticulate people renders much life history research fragile (Stott, 1973, p. 195) the researcher's role seems increasingly unenviable, faced with (previously unrecognised) dilemmas.

For Williams (in Brechin & Walmsley 1989, p. 257) these dilemmas can be resolved though the use of 'imaginative strategies of communication' (see, for example, March, 1992; Minkes *et al.*, 1994). For the informant I cite above, our construction and referral to his 'lifeplan' (a visual plan surveying 'good' or 'bad' experiences from birth to the present day) soon promoted more elaborated reminiscences.

However, demands that are made on the creativity and imagination of the researcher may lead some to shy away from the task. If, as Nisbet (1976) argues the 'creative heart of the artist' has been lost in the social sciences, then the researcher role presented in life history literature is hardly desirable. In comparison with more orthodox methodologies, guidance on the use of the life history method is unrepresented in methodology texts. This reflects the dismissive attitudes of many academics to life history research (Plummer, 1983, p. 74). On reading a life history some may feel that they have left the world of social theory for the world of idiosyncratic description. Frank (1979, pp. 71–72) observes similar scepticism:

Life history documents stand so close to the prescientist world view that the professional attitude of social scientists seems to reject them outright.

Thus presented with Ed's story (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976), the reader may feel like they have moved away from the theoretical representation of disability in society, left with unsubstantiated anecdotes. Devoid of the 'expert researcher's' hand of authority, the reader may feel let down—left with fables, concrete conclusions absent. However, even if we do oppose the majority view and take up the challenge of doing life history research, failure to acquire the proffered skills necessary for presenting life stories of people with learning difficulties may have damaging repercussions. If the researcher fails to adequately acquire the grand characteristics outlined in the life history literature then what becomes of the representation of informants lives? What if I fail to truly grasp the understandings of informants who, although lacking articulation, do have important stories to tell.

In truth, these creative resources may have been mystified by some writers and perhaps all the researcher can offer in their defence is a commitment to the people they attempt to represent (Parker & Baldwin, 1992, p. 200). Imagination may blossom through empathy.

### *Dilemmas in Balancing the Social and Individual in Life Histories*

Though the personal nature of the life history necessarily reaffirms individual subjectivity, dangers exist in overlooking the social aspects behind the story. Oral historians such as Thompson (1988, p. 258) point out that too much emphasis on the individual aspect of accounts may fail to present 'the cut and thrust of contemporary political narrative and the unseen pressures of economic and structural change'.

Inasmuch as the life history permits the reader to understand how the tellers social context is constituted, turning a blind eye to the social order in pursuit of individual subjectivity may fail to adequately represent the individual's world. The researcher may be criticised for identifying too closely with his or her informants. Whyte's classic 1943 study *Street Corner Society* highlights the difficulties that may occur through the development of a close research relationship. For Stott (1973, p. 170) the strengths of Whyte's work were also its weaknesses. Though Whyte's closeness to the cornerboys enabled him to picture their attitudes towards society, he strongly endorsed their contempt for the 'college boys' of Cornerville, for non-Italian teachers and social workers.

The development of the relationship and attention to individual understandings may elicit the most vivid of stories, but immersion may lead to misrepresentation. Furthermore, following Denzin (1970), the overly-immersed researcher may be disempowering to his or her informants. In attempting to articulate the stories of the inarticulate, the researcher must reflect upon their own interpretations of the events presented to them. Sympathy for informants' injustices is all very well until those feelings start to take over the researcher's representation of the story. For people with learning difficulties, as with other marginalised groups, it is highly likely that experiences of oppression will be imparted. Yet if life stories are to provide an insight into human resilience then researchers must ensure that their own sympathies do not lead them into representing their informants only as victims: to continuously reassert the experience of subordination may be just as disempowering as the original experience of discrimination. My choice of an informant's experience of harassment earlier in this paper could be criticised on the grounds that it merely reinforces victim stereotypes of people with learning difficulties. Moreover, selectively emphasising informants' experiences to confirm political and/or theoretical concerns held by the researcher, may fail to elicit the essential characteristics of each individual's account of their social groups (Stott, 1973, p. 200).

This balancing act between the personal and social does call into question the explicit aims and interests of the researcher. This may explain why some researchers do not attempt deeper sociocultural assessment of their informants' stories—though this introduces another problem. Resistance to analyses is exemplified by Bogdan & Taylor's (1976, p. 51) position: 'Ed's story stands by itself as a rich source of understanding. We will resist the temptation to analyze it and reflect upon what it tells us about Ed'.

Stood alone, life histories may tap into the reader's own sociopolitical frames of reference, but to decide against making references with social theory could reduce individual stories into nothing more than sound-bites. Failure to locate stories in social theories of disability may seriously jeopardise informants' words—leaving them open to interpretations elaborating individual pathology over disabling environments.

To draw links between an individual's story and the possible societal structures that function as a background to that person's life, not only raises questions of researcher interpretation, but also again opens up debates over concepts of 'truth' and objectivity. Questions about how and why certain conclusions are made do

highlight the problematic role of the researcher in taking the life history a stage further than simple presentation. Here, perhaps, the researcher can only call upon ideas of researcher reflexivity and account for the inferences they make. Yet another problem emerges. In tune with current concerns with participatory research, researchers need to ask how far they should involve informants in the analyses that are made. Erlandson, *et al.* (1993), following an approach of naturalistic inquiry, assert that any analyses should be created under the watchful eye of the informant (or 'stake holder'). This is all very well and good, but research that involves people with learning difficulties taps into a subordinated group of people who have long been prevented from having a say in their lives, never mind working as co-researchers on an academic project. Whilst research has started to involve people with learning difficulties in an authoritative way (e.g. Whittaker *et al.*, 1991, 1993; Downer & Ferns, 1993) it remains to be seen exactly how researchers can truly involve these informants with the conclusions that are made.

#### *Issues of Bias and Power Within Life Histories*

The credibility of life histories is sometimes viewed as a function of the extent to which they remain faithful to the reality of the story-teller (Harrison & Stina Lyon, 1993). Such propositions may be admired, as the researcher attempts to discard the role of expert in turning to the informed storyteller. However, to merely assume that 'authority' is passed over to the informant seriously blurs issues of power and bias enmeshed within the process of collecting stories. Further dilemmas occur in the case of research that involves inarticulate subjects.

Sources of error are well documented within life history research. Plummer (1983) and Oakley (1981) have noted various sources of bias that may seriously affect the telling of a story. These include the informant's tendency to rehearse a story and/or in some cases lie. In addition, Bruner (1987, p. 13) observes that informants often ascribe intentions to actions after the event. Methods designed to address such bias have taken many forms. Commonly proposed are checks for consistency, for example, between accounts of the same event or experience in different interview sessions (Klockars, 1977, cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). A result of checking the informant's words is that real reasons are revealed for the presence of contradictions and confusion. As trust and rapport develop modification of a story might be expected. Inconsistency may be a normal feature of a developing research relationship rather than a sign of bias. To ask whether our informants are telling the truth may be irrelevant (Dean & Foot Whyte, 1978, cited in Walmsley, 1993). What is important is to understand why they present their stories like they do.

More significantly, a major source of bias stems from the researcher's own preoccupations. Such interests may lead the researcher to highlight some points at the expense of other experiences that hold greater significance for the informant. In Ed's story (Bogdan & Taylor 1976), considerations of institutionalisation are clearly explicated. Yet the reasons for elaborations around this theme are unclear. Do we conclude that the experience of institutionalisation is a salient aspect of Ed's life or

a reflection of Bogdan and Taylor's own (political) interests? Again a measure of critical self-awareness on the part of the researcher is called for as they monitor their input into an account.

Considerations of bias become even more complex on involving people with learning difficulties. When inarticulate informants are involved, sources of bias originating from the researcher take on a more primary concern. For people who are unable to present long and elaborate anecdotes, the researcher may be placed in the role of interpreter or biographer. Such roles run the risk of researchers imposing their own assumptions, understandings and ambitions upon the stories that emerge. In turn, if the life story is taken as the basis from which sociological understanding emerges, whose understandings are presented?

In my own research one informant exclaimed: 'I don't want to go to work'. Should I conclude that this informant has fallen into learned helplessness following a decade of discrimination in the work place? Or has she simply chosen to take time off work as she prefers watching the television all day? Also, if the only articulation available was 'no work', the various interpretations available are further extended. Following Moffet & McElheny (1966), what a story is about is a question of how it is told. We cannot separate the tale from the telling as beneath the content of every message is intent. If my interpretation is dominant then the intent that I give to the narrative may actually reflect my motivations and not those of the informants.

Hence, there is more to hearing a story than listening to the words. The life history as with any other method is open to exploitation. To give a voice to people with learning difficulties may well be empowering, but in masking the processes involved in eliciting stories, researcher may well be part of a process of disempowerment (Bhavnani, 1990, p. 146). It is up to the researcher involved in the collection of life histories to be aware of their impact on the stories told and to acknowledge their input.

### **Conclusion: the valid role of the life history**

You must begin to tell your stories—tell people what has happened to you.  
(The words of a self-advocate cited in Sutcliffe, 1990, p. 21.)

The life history reaffirms the place of individual creativity in research. It offers us a way of seeing that originates from the individual and encourages us to overcome our ignorance of the lived experience of labelled groups. People with learning difficulties are writing their own histories and setting out their agendas for the future. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the rapidly developing self-advocacy movement. From self-disclosure and reflection self-advocates may form a solid base of identity from which they may continue to grow. Consequently, the assumption that the views and opinions of people with learning difficulties, neither exist nor matter is thereby challenged, and we are alerted to the potential of lives that as a society we continue to stifle.

Life histories provide one method in which the experiences of people with learning difficulties can be presented. However, the stories of these informants are

not just for the attention of other researchers—they are also, and perhaps most importantly, the greatest resource for those who share similar experiences of disabling society. I would assert that the ultimate project for researchers is still to be accomplished, that is, to produce ways and means in which these experiences can be made accessible to people with learning difficulties. Calling upon the everyday artefact of stories allows a good starting point.

## NOTES

- [1] The term learning difficulties is chosen in this paper, as opposed to other related synonyms, such as mental handicap, mental impairment and learning disabilities. This reflects the preferred terminology of those involved in the self-advocacy movement. As one self-advocate clearly puts it; ‘If you put “people with learning difficulties” then they know that people want to learn and to be taught how to do things’ (quoted in Sutcliffe & Simons 1993, p. 23).

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