Biographical Method

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A Perspective on Biography: Domain, Variety, and Complexity

Biographers write lives.
Leon Edel, Writing Lives, 1984

This statement, “Biographers write lives,” is not so simple as it sounds. It is the first line in Leon Edel’s (1984) “manifesto” on doing biography. “Writing lives” carries connotations that seem more than a bit broader than biography per se. Handbooks and handbook chapters, such as this, are codifications, statements of rules of practice useful to practitioners—in this instance, practitioners of qualitative research methods. When one writes lives, so I would argue, one finds that every rule, even when so simply stated as a “rule of thumb,” always plays through some individual person and becomes his or her interpretation as the rule is thought about or put into practice. And when one writes a handbook chapter, giving form to an idea, such as “biographical method,” the individual author expresses a personal point of view. In an unusual sense, I would argue, every text that is created is a self-statement, a bit of autobiography, a statement that carries an individual signature. Such reasoning suggests that all writing should be in the first person, reflecting that individual voice, even when one writes a chapter in a handbook. At an extreme, paraphrasing Saroyan, I almost want to make the case that it’s autobiography, all down the line.

In this essay I will speak in the first person, in spite of some conventional wisdom that suggests “handbooks” are more detached summaries of general knowledge. My audience is students and scholars of qualitative methods who are interested in adding biographical method and life writing to their inquiry repertory. My outline is fairly simple. First is a brief overview of domain or “turf.” Second, I present a process account of “doing biography,” the problems one encounters, the alternatives available, the trade-offs, and the decisions one tries to live with. The third section is a too-brief excursion into the place of biography in the several intellectual disciplines that make use of life writing. Finally, I offer a few tentative generalizations to integrate the overall perspective.

The Domain of Biography: General and Personal

Formally, biography is “the written history of a person’s life”—so says Webster’s Dictionary.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: As usual, I want to thank my colleagues and students in the Department of Education at Washington University. In particular, the members of my recent seminars have been most helpful.
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The Oxford English Dictionary nearly agrees, but not quite. "A written record of the life of an individual" is that volume's second usage. The word life appears in both definitions. Person and individual seem close synonyms, although some might argue that a person, a human being, is only one kind of individual within the larger category of individuals. And some might argue that record is different from history, perhaps less interpretive. Finally, written defines oral traditions as outside the genre. A too-limiting constraint for contemporary students and scholars? Obviously, yes! But the major point of this personal perspective and more formal definitional introduction lies in the domain or turf to be encompassed in any discussion of biography. The OED, in its first definition, confounds further the domain of biography as it states, "the history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature." Women are excluded. The social sciences of anthropology, psychology, and sociology are excluded. From this point on, the concept of biography, and the activity it signifies, becomes contentious—some would argue "political." And that is an important generalization.

Finally, part of what I want to say in this chapter draws upon several vivid personal professional experiences I have had in qualitative research. Three decades ago, I spent a long semester in an elementary classroom taught by a man named William Geoffrey. We wrote a book about that experience, The Complexities of an Urban Classroom (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968). It was cast as a "microethnography" of the classroom, a study of a small social system. In another sense the book was a piece of biography, the story of one semester of Geoffrey and his teaching. In a further sense, it became part of my autobiography, the most important professional learning experience of my life, an "epiphany" or "turning point," in Denzin's (1989) interpretive theory of biography. The text carried, in a subdued way, both of those personal stories. At the time, neither of us thought about the experience or the book as his or my biography or autobiography. But, I would say now, it can be reconstructed in this alternative way.

The second personal experience that is very pertinent was a follow-up study, the "life histories" of the teachers and administrators of the Kensington Elementary School and the Milford School District. We called that Educational Innovators: Then and Now (Smith, Kleine, Prunty, & Dwyer, 1986). Life histories, at least as we developed them in this instance from long, two- to seven-hour, interviews, are briefer, more focused biographies, mostly told from the teachers' own perspectives. One of the major personal outcomes of that work was the realization that at some point I wanted to do what I came to call "a real biography." I am now in the middle, actually toward the end, of that experience, a biography that carries the title Nora Barlow and the Darwin Legacy (Smith, in press). That effort, as process and product, will flow in and out of this essay. Each of these experiences has led to considerable reflection on "how we did what we did," what we have called "miniature theories of methodology," often written as "methodological appendices." For me, writing this chapter on "biographical method" is not a simple, detached, impersonal exercise. And that may be good or bad, as we shall see.

Variants of Biography

Life writing comes with many labels—portraits, profiles, memoirs, life stories, life histories, case studies, autobiographies, journals, diaries, and on and on—each suggesting a slightly different perspective under consideration. Most of these can be tracked through dictionary definitions, illustrations in this text, and various sources listed in the references. Noting variety in biography is perhaps too simple a point. But the world seems full of true believers, individuals who want to restrict options to one or just a few alternatives in creating or criticizing biography. Further, one of the points I want to make is that life writing is in serious contention among readers, critics, and practitioners of biography. For instance, one of the most investigated individuals in the Western world is Charles Darwin. A brief glance at him, his interpreters, and the written records involving him suggests the range of possibilities in doing life writing and the difficulties of interpretation for anyone contemplating biography.

Darwin's first major publication—life writing, if you will—was his journal (1839) of the five-year voyage of HMS Beagle as it circumnavigated the world between 1831 and 1836. Also in 1839, FitzRoy, captain of the Beagle, published his journal, a companion volume about the voyage. In 1845, Darwin revised, with significant additions and abridgments, his journal. New, but only slightly different, editions appeared in 1860 and 1870. Some hundred years after the voyage, in 1933, Nora Barlow published Charles Darwin's Diary of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle. Approximately one-fourth of the material in that publication was new, previously unpublished. Barlow included a number of footnotes, a list of dramatis personae with brief identifying biographical information, maps, six pages of "bibliography," of Darwin publications from the Beagle period, and other related material.

In his late 60s, Darwin wrote an autobiography for the "amusement" of his family. Darwin's son Francis published the autobiography in 1888 as part of the three-volume Life and Letters of Charles Darwin. But the autobiography had been expurgated. In

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"the written history of the written history of" from Webster's Dictionary.

-- the Department of Education at Harvard was most helpful.
1958, Nora Barlow published a “de-edited” version of the autobiography, restoring some 6,000 words. In recent years, additions to a long list of major biographies continue to appear. Bowley (1990) and Desmond and Moore (1991) have contributed at great length (500 and 800 pages) major new views. The list continues, but the major point here is that biography, “life writing,” comes in multiple forms, lengths, focuses, and perspectives. A related point is the importance of insight and creativity on the part of the biographer in the studying, constructing, and writing of lives or parts of lives.

The Special Instance of Autobiography

Autobiography is a special case of life writing. Writing autobiographies and critiques of autobiography is one of the most rapidly developing and, recently, one of the most controversial forms (Lejune, 1989; Olney, 1980; Stanley, 1992). Autobiography suggests the power of agency in social and literary affairs. It gives voice to people long denied access. By example, it usually, but not always, eulogizes the subjective, the “important part of human existence” over the objective, “less significant parts of life.” It blurs the borders of fiction and nonfiction. And, by example, it is a sharp critique of positivist social science. In short, from my perspective, autobiography in its changing forms is at the core of late twentieth-century paradigmatic shifts in the structures of thought. And that is quite an agenda. Even as I state these tentative generalizations, I have to pull back, at least to a degree, for the eminent and consummate behavioristic psychologist B. F. Skinner (1977, 1979, 1983) has written a three-volume autobiography that denies every one of the points. The simple lesson is, Don’t generalize or evaluate too quickly about life writing!

With tantalizing good humor, Pritchett (1977), in his presidential address to the English Association, pushed some of the limits of “autobiography.” In his opening paragraph he posed one controversial version of the difficulties this variant of life writing creates for the scholar as reader: “It is common among knowing reviewers to lump autobiography and the novel together as examples of two different ways of telling agreeable lies.” For anyone with “scientific” leanings, doing “fiction” is anathema. Caveat emptor is an immediate response. The paragraph continues:

But, of course, you have only to start writing your autobiography to know how crucial the distinction is. The novelist distributes himself in disguise among the characters in his work. It is easy for him to pretend he’s a man, woman, or child and, if he likes, in the first person. The autobiographer on the other hand comes forward as the hero or the anti-hero of his story and draws other people into himself.

But Pritchett can’t quite let the audience off so easily as he concludes the paragraph with the bon mot:

In a sense he is sort of stripper: the suspense of his story lies in guessing how far he will undress. Or, of course—if he is writing about his career— we see him putting more and more important clothes on. (p. 3)

In a penetrating essay, Gusdorf (1980) makes a similar point more pithily, that autobiography is “a sort of posthumous propaganda for posterity” (p. 36).

For the reader, determining what one learns from an autobiography becomes an exercise in critical judgment. Few would argue that they have not learned something of importance from reading an autobiography. But here as well, readers must do their own constructing, reconstructing, and evaluating. Reading Eakin (1989) reinforces such a conclusion.

The larger theory of knowledge issues and dilemmas—What do we know? How confident can we be in our knowledge?—becomes clearly visible in assaying this kind of scholarly inquiry. Olney (1980), in his historical and critical overview, does a kind of analysis on the label per se:

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As his argument proceeds, Olney sees the self in a never-ending transition, ending only in death. And that self will see the life from a different point of view at different points in the life. Finally, and this point is made even more strongly in Gusdorf’s (1980) essay from the same volume, the very act of writing forces a self-examination that changes both the self and quite possibly the life as well. In a sense, three open-ended systems are in constant flux, flow, and interchange. From my point of view, positive knowledge about anything in the human condition is a misconstrual. At the same time, one knows more than “nothing.” Knowledge has a quality of a balancing act. The problems are both more subtle and more complex than Pritchett’s metaphor of robing and disrobing and Eakin’s analysis of Lejune’s definitional problems, although these are important parts of the dilemma.

In related disciplines, the historian Hexter (1971) speaks of the first and second records in historical inquiry. The first is the something “out there” that has happened over time in the past. The “second record” is what each historian brings to the first

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Several years ago, Don introduced the concept of “the professional” into the profession. His argument is simple. Others, be they physicians, or, one might add, craftspeople, “situations of practice” or, uncertainty, instability conflict. In my view, that dimensions. In Schütz’s professionals face cannot be be of “technical rationality.” I to social scientists in ge

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Among a number of life writers illustrating the particulars of the processes involved in the craft of biography, none surpasses the insights of Catherine Drinker Bowen (1959, 1968), James Clifford (1970), and Leon Edel (1984). Each of their books is an autobiographical statement of its author’s perspective on biography: Edel—“all my writings on biography which I wish to preserve” (p. 248); Bowen—“the biographer’s way of life, which to my mind is a pleasant way” (p. ix); and Clifford—“the operative concerns of a writer who decides to recreate the career of another person” (p. vii). It is to them, and a few others, I turn for an outline of understandings and generalizations in the practice of the biographical craft.

Selecting a Subject
and First Inquiries

The obvious first task of biography is the decision concerning a person to write about. One must select a hero or heroine, be he or she recognized as such or not by the population at large. The autobiographer solves this first problem simply, although questions arise immediately as to why an individual would think his or her life worth telling—for example, has a kind of self-deception already begun? In contrast, the biographer needs to think carefully and analytically, to perceive intuitively an anomaly, or to be serendipitous, that is, just plain lucky. The literature is full of examples of each variant of what social scientists call “problem finding,” a major element in creativity. And if one wants to complicate these simple interpretations, and perhaps make oneself a bit uneasy, follow Leon Edel (1984) as he reflects: “In a world full of subjects—centuries crowded with notables and dunces—we may indeed ask why a modern biographer fixes his attention on certain faces and turns his back on others” (p. 60).

The biographer’s personality—motives, fears, unconscious conflicts, and yearnings—reaches out to responsive, if not similar, territory in the person to be subject. The dance of Boswell and Johnson, of Strachey and his eminent Victorians, and of more recent American biographers and their choices is analyzed vividly by Edel. In a compelling short preface to Young Man Luther, Erik Erikson (1962) poses the issues this way:

I have attempted in this preface to give a brief rationale for writing this book; I doubt, though, that the impetus for writing anything but a textbook can ever be rationalized. My choice of subject forces me to deal with problems of faith and problems of Germany, two enigmas which I could have avoided by writing about some other young great man. But it seems that I did not wish to avoid them. (p. 9; emphasis added)
What meets the eye is never quite what it seems—so Edel and others show and tell us.

Often the problem finding is mixed with discovering an important new pool of data. Derek Hudson (1972) commented in the introduction to his biography of A. J. Munby, the "hero" of the Hannah Cullwick story:

I first became aware of A. J. Munby in the autumn of 1968. I was looking through The Oxford Companion to English Literature and came to the heading: MUNBY, ARTHUR JOSEPH (1828-1910). After mentioning various books of his verse, the brief entry concluded: "Munby was secretly and happily married to his servant, who refused to quit her station. The fact explains some of the allusions in his poems." (p. 1)

Then began his chase to find the manuscripts. That exciting adventure of biographer Derek Hudson is told briefly in the introduction and epilogue to the biography Munby: Man of Two Worlds. Later, others picked up on Hudson’s efforts (Hiley, 1979; Stanley, 1984) and Hannah Cullwick, maid-of-all-work, became a nineteenth-century heroine. Photographic records would illuminate her life, Munby’s life, and the nether side of women’s work, women’s lives, and social class in the Victorian era in England. One finds one improbable biographical story after another.

And, if you want to laugh and cry, and sometimes get angry, read Catherine Drinker Bowen’s Adventures of a Biographer (1959). Her stories of being denied the role of authorized biographer of Chief Justice Holmes, of being made to feel an outsider at the American Historical Association, and of being snubbed at a display of John Adams’s artifacts will make at least some of you want to become biographers. Some of the hellishness of life writing becomes clearer here, as well.

These exploratory activities and experiments, finding the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, Clifford labels "outside research." He is content to tell a half dozen of these fascinating and improbable stories of his own adventures and those of others. He does not reach for patterns or conceptualizations of the activities. In contrast, in telling some of my own stories (Smith, 1990, 1992), I initially labeled the outside activity “anthropological biography”; later, I called it “ethnographic biography.” The broader and compelling insight, for me, was the similarity between aspects of doing biography and ethnography, the latter having its own well-developed modes of inquiry. What a windfall it would seem if the ethnographic ideas of Bronislaw Malinowski, William Foote Whyte, and Clifford Geertz, among others, could be brought to bear on the craft of biography! The possibilities of intellectual integration and synthesis become readily apparent. One hopes that such possibilities will spill over into practice.

But my central point is the vagaries involved in selecting an individual to be the subject of one’s biography and in beginning the inquiries into the life. A further corollary is caution in criticizing or judging too quickly anyone’s motivation and selection of a subject for his or her life writing. Major personal issues may be involved.

Creating and/or Using an Archive

Life writing as an empirical exercise feeds on data: letters, documents, interviews. In these days of high intellectual specialization, many biographers miss the joys and the frustrations of creating an archive. But in the doing of archival creation, one runs into a number of interesting difficulties.

In general, part of my personal problem-solving strategy is to have several "tentative models" in my head whenever I approach new problems. As I began on the Nora Barlow task, I had heard that the Margaret Mead archive was housed in the Library of Congress. I already knew that Barlow and Mead were friends. I telephoned the Library of Congress to find out if any of the Barlow letters were in the Mead collection. I was told, "Yes, we have a number of her letters." During an American Educational Research Association meeting in Washington I stole away for a couple of half days and photocopied some 80 letters. Substantively, I learned that in her letters Barlow rarely discussed her Darwin work with either Mead or Gregory Bateson. Even as she was working on the HMS Beagle materials, Darwin’s time “in the field,” Mead and Bateson were getting married and were researching in Bali and elsewhere—that is, doing their own creative ethnographic work. And somehow no connections were ever drawn. I was amazed at that. That experience led to one of the most significant driving questions in the biography: Who did Nora Barlow talk to about her intellectual work? From a symbolic interactionist perspective, one’s immediate social intellectual world is important in what one does. The thematic question is both relevant and important. I have spent several years answering that question; it is a large part of the structure of the biography per se. And it arose as I was building an archive of Nora Barlow’s letters.

My wife and I spent parts of three summers creating the Nora Barlow archives—more than 1,000 A-4 envelopes in 38 R-Kive 725 Bankers Boxes and a small catalogue as well. In very practical terms, we have separate boxes for letters: immediate family, extended family, and friends and colleagues. They are arranged alphabetically and chronologically. Similarly, we have boxes of published and unpulished chronological books and more phd stored in the large controlled wing adjacent of the Cambridge Library. But, in his usual p s, history, is the organ Assembled and hoard of that memory” (p. 4).

In addition, an annotated index is in progress over nine or ten years. The archival of the life. "Bec (1992) carries its own imitations. Other bioi: one else’s archival e your original or, I, do with Ma e data? But then, I have library—Truman, Ker does one do with th McCullough (1992) knowledgments at th.

Finally, no one library as full as Nora Barlow that are important f data exist in all sorts. Finding those is a new as my discussion has lectual and social pro in spite of attempts at point is clear: One e file, an archive, as one biography. Resourceful and should occur here.

Finding and Developing

One of the most difficult aspects of biography is the search for biography in the life of the writer. Early, based on an inside edge and an overview of previous essays I have been trying to integrate the 1987, 1990). The pec knowledge of their past: the first as she turned 60s, 70s, and 80s. With the or other, new facets of t views of the significance new audiences appeal to biographer’s agony is
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published and unpublished manuscripts, also ordered chronologically. There are also photos and books and more photos and books. All are now stored in the large temperature- and humidity-controlled wing adjacent to the Manuscripts Room of the Cambridge University Library. It makes one feel almost a "real" archivist. As Edel (1984) says, in his usual pithy style, "Biography, like history, is the organization of human memory. Assembled and hoarded papers are bits and pieces of that memory" (p. 93).

In addition, a major outcome of the archival activity is an overview of the life—original materials over nine or ten decades of her life span of 103 years. The archival work begins the construction of the life. "Becoming an archivist" (Smith, 1992) carries its own stories and theoretical implications. Other biographers "just" confront someone else's archival efforts. But what would you or I do with Margaret Mead and 600 feet of data? But then, I have never been in a presidential library—Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon. What does one do with that kind of archival wealth? McCullough (1992) hints at that in the acknowledgments at the end of his recent _Truman_.

Finally, no one library or home study, even one as full as Nora Barlow's, contains all of the papers that are important for the life story. "Pools of data" exist in all sorts of likely and unlikely places. Finding those is another story in doing biography, as my discussion has already indicated. The intellectual and social process turns back upon itself, in spite of attempts at analytic clarity. The general point is clear: One either finds or builds a data file, an archive, as one step in the process of doing biography. Resourcefulness and imagination can and should occur here as elsewhere in the process.

Finding and Developing One's Theme

One of the most difficult decisions facing the biographer as he or she practices the craft of biography resides in the slant, perspective, or theme that is needed to guide the development of the life to be written. Sometimes the theme comes early, based on an insight from preliminary knowledge and an overview of the subject's life. In two previous essays I have recounted in some detail knowing early that "the Darwin legacy" was the theme to integrate the life of Nora Barlow (Smith, 1987, 1990). The perception was grounded in the knowledge of her four books, written late in life, the first as she turned 50, and then one each in her 60s, 70s, and 80s. But sometimes also, reconstructions vie with the original decision as new data enter, new facets of the life begin to form, new views of the significance of the story arise, and new audiences appear or become salient. The biographer's agony is caught with what might be called "the restless theme" (Smith, 1992). In the biography of Nora Barlow, the "intellectual aristocracy" became a major competing theme. I agonized over that during much of my spring 1990 sabbatical in Cambridge. Which theme is superior and which is subordinate? Which will carry better the burden of the evidence of the life? And for which audience? The biographer's internal argument over which theme is the more powerful eventually is entangled in the question of "audience" and publisher. To whom does one want to speak, and who wants to produce the book?

The decisions regarding theme are both part of, and followed closely by, what Bowen (1968) calls "plotting the biography," "Conflict," "suspense," "humor," and "humanity" are some of the terms she uses to highlight issues and decisions regarding plot. Chronology is always important, but a simple chronology of birth, education, marriage, career, and death won't do—for her. What is the book to say about the hero or heroine? Is it a happy or tragic life? And what of the times the central figure lived through? And what scenes and incidents give the life a fullness and a richness? And who are the friends and acquaintances who breathe vitality into the existence? And how do they come and go over the years? In Bowen's view the life writer must have all this finding, settling on, and developing the theme in mind as he or she starts to put words linearly onto sheets of paper. And then, at least in some instances, the writing takes over and transforms things—such as a theme—once again.

"The Figure Under the Carpet"

In the flow of interrelated problems and decisions—picking a subject, developing a theme, becoming aware of the multilayered contexts of lives—one is more difficult than insight into "the figure under the carpet," as Leon Edel (1979) phrases the problem of coming to know the essence of one's subject. The metaphor is mixed but vivid. From one perspective, the view can make one pause, if not forget that "essences" are in high debate these days, and the best one can do is construct a pattern that fits well the data one has of the life of the person being studied and written about. The figure under the carpet is not so much found as constructed. The "mask of life"—the appearance, the facade, the overt behavior one sees (or finds in letters, diaries, and other documents)—and the underlying "life myth"—the major inferences into the character and personality of the person being written about—are like a tapestry, which shows images on its front side and displays the underlying construction on the back. In three pages, Edel dissects Ernest Hemingway—the macho, warring, champion of all he undertook.
tapestry and "the troubled, uncertain, insecure figure, who works terribly hard to give himself eternal assurance," the figure under the carpet (p. 27). Great biographers look for that figure, construct it carefully, and paint it convincingly; lesser ones never do. Edel, thinking and acting like a composite of Sherlock Holmes and Sigmund Freud, hunts among slips of the tongue, anomalies in everyday behavior, the significant gestures, and the moving and poignant statement in a letter, essay, or novel for clues to that elusive figure.

Bowen, denied the letters of Justice Holmes, which were reserved for the official, the definitive, the authorized biography, talked to, so it seems, nearly everyone who had known Holmes. Eleven of his twelve law secretaries agreed to be interviewed by her. And often she sought out the places where Holmes had lived and worked. Through small detail she pursued the figure under the carpet. Even here, however, subtleties occur. As Bowen (1959) notes, "But the subject of a biography cannot remain at one age—at fifty, at twenty-five, at forty. He must grow old and the reader must see and feel the process" (p. 65). And what, we might ask, of the life myth? How does it evolve, change, grow, and decline—if it does?

Each biographer carries his or her own conception of personality, or character, as it is called by literary biographers. To Virginia Woolf (1927/1960), biography was about the truthful transmission of personality. The truth is like "granite," and personality, at least in the selection of which truths to present, is like a "rainbow." In Woolf's view, truth and personality make one of the biographer's perennial dilemmas. Present-day scholars often see truth as less than granite. As I will argue shortly, sometimes the implicit personality theories can be helpful as sensitizing concepts, and at other times they can be blinder. Once again, Edel (1984) suggests imaginative—and perhaps impractical—ways of coming to terms with such problems—reading psychoanalytic literature, being psychoanalyzed, or even entering into collaborative relationships with an analyst in doing biography. From my perspective, and in a not so simple manner, the biographer brings all of his or her own personality, understandings, and experience to the task of creating a view of the individual under study. If that be true, it poses severe problems for traditional social science, for the sources and implementation of creativity can only be bolstered by technocratic procedures, not carried by them. That raises a long and tortuous argument for those of us working in that tradition.

Form and Shape

Even as one comprehends databases, themes, and underlying patterns or figures in the biogra-

phy, other dilemmas and choices remain. One of the biographer's major decisions lies in the form or type of biography to be attempted. Clifford (1970) presents a taxonomy of types and a discussion of the factors to be considered in the decision. The underlying dimension of the classification is the degree of objectivity to subjectivity, perhaps better labeled the degree of intrusion of the author into the manuscript. He suggests five points on the continuum.

The "objective biography" is impossible in an absolute sense, but some biographies tend toward a factual celebration, usually held together by chronology, with minimal biographer interpretation. In terms of an earlier perspective, if not cliché, "the facts speak for themselves." This type of biography shades into the "scholarly-historical," a form retaining heavy factual emphasis and a strong chronological organization, but with increasing historical background and attempts to develop the underlying character of the subject as defining features. The intruding author is beginning to construct a form with context. This is perhaps the most prevalent type among academic biographers.

The "artistic-scholarly" form involves some of the same exhaustive research, but the biographer takes the role "of an imaginative creative artist, presenting the details in the liveliest and most interesting manner possible" (p. 85). The rainbow is coming to dominate the granite. According to Clifford, most of Catherine Drinker Bowen's biographies fall here. And these efforts are damned by some as "popular." In this regard, I find Bowen's (1959) comment as she attended a frustrating-to-her meeting of the American Historical Association particularly instructive: "There are ways to come at history, I thought, pursuing my way down the hotel corridor. Let us say the professors come at it from the northeast and I from the southwest. Either way will serve, provided the wind blows clean and the fog lifts" (p. 102). Domains of intolerance and true belief infuriated her, and sometimes the wind does not blow clean and the fog does not lift.

"Narrative biography" involves a fictionalizing of scenes and conversations, based on letters and documents, that make the writing both factual and highly imaginative at the same time. The end of the continuum is the fifth form, the "fictional biography," almost a historical novel, with minimal attention to original research and primary resources. The difficulty in putting biographies into these categories appears when one names Irving Stone as an instance of an author whose work falls into the fifth category. For example, correspondence in the Nora Barlow archives contains questions from him to her about items such as the nature of the child used in the Darwin household, asked as Stone wrote his biography of Darwin, The Origin.

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The continuum is helpful for biographers as they think about the kind of book they want to write or feel they are able to write. And that, the special talents and skills the biographer brings to the task, is an undertreated issue in my view.5

Context and Writing

Heroes and heroines do not exist in isolation. Contexts exist in lives and context exists in writing lives. In a vivid illustration, Bowen suggests the problems in beginning and ending the written biography per se. In Yankee From Olympus, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., does not appear in the first 80 pages (seven chapters) of the biography, for to understand Holmes, Bowen argues, one must understand New England, Yankee traditions, and Holmes's father, the senior Oliver, who was poet, physician, professor, and storytelling author of "Autocrat of the Breakfast Table." Other biographies begin alternatively. If the subject is well known, the "opening scene" can be of his or her birth; if the subject is unknown, it might be better to present "some scene to catch the reader's attention, show that the hero and his doings are important and exciting and perhaps have a bearing upon the subject" (Bowen, 1968, p. 21). So Bowen contributes to a reflective conversation with her fellow biographers on a particular dilemma of the craft.

Bowen (1968) also addresses the issue of how the biographer thinks through the "end scene." Most striking perhaps is her account of her book John Adams and the American Revolution. Adams's last words were "Thomas Jefferson survives"; he was unaware that Jefferson had died the same day. As Bowen notes, "This double departure of the heroes was epic, tremendous, and needed only to be set down in its bare facts. How could a biographer miss, I asked myself, and looked forward with relish from the day Adams was chosen as subject" (p. 38). But she lost her plot, the proportions of the life, and the original shape of the book, and she had a manuscript already book length with some 50 years to go before 1826. She ended the story in 1776, not a bad eventful moment, but still not the grander ending scene she really wanted. Along the way in her essay, Bowen raises important ideas, such as the "burden of the whole," the keeping of the totality in mind as one writes, the fact that "sometimes luck favors the biographer," the joy in finding a key note lost for years; she notes that "history came at least to a partial rescue" in her case, in the form of what would become Independence Day, July 4. And that provided a significant way of ending the biography, even if less than the possibilities of 1823.

Following upon Bowen, a neophyte biographer can be sensitized and begin thinking through his or her specific subject and situation. Critical judgment, reflective practice, is never right or wrong in some absolute or technical rule-application sense. Nonetheless, some decisions work out better than others, and helping with all this is what a theory of biographical method should be about.

A Brief Conclusion on Craft

Virginia Woolf was half right: Writing lives is the devil. But a strand of intellectual excitement, approaching ecstasy, also exists. If one is fortunate to find a heroine or hero from another time, place, and culture, the biographical activity takes on a strong cast of ethnography. Earlier craft skills come into play, even though always with a bit different flavor. The intellectual problems seem to demand more of creativity than of technical or rule-governed problem solving. And that is a challenge to the practice of traditional social science. Some of my students and colleagues suggest that the integration might occur in "metacognition," self-directed thinking about thinking. My own tentative choice of guiding labels is "reflective practice," caught vividly by Donald Schön (1987): "Clearly, it is one thing to be able to reflect-in-action and quite another to be able to reflect on our reflection in action so as to produce a good verbal description of it; and it is still another thing to be able to reflect on the resulting description" (p. 31).

The problems of the craft of biography are "messy," not "well-formed." The problems contain elements of ambiguity, complexity, uncertainty, value conflict, and uniqueness.

In too-brief fashion I have presented some of the dilemmas and some of the several taxonomies of resolutions used by such master biographical practitioners as Catherine Drinker Bowen, James Clifford, and Leon Edel. Thinking along with them creates images and metaphors for handling one's own devils. Doing biography is a great way to live.

Disciplinary Strands:
Alternative Interpretations

There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography.

Paul Valéry
(quoted in Olney, 1980, preface)

Biographical method can be viewed in alternative, and perhaps more abstract, ways than as a craft or process. For better and worse—that is, the
benefits of focused vision and the limits of sometimes narrowed vision—much intellectual activity is organized as academic disciplines. Several of the disciplines have claims on biography and biographical method. Even though they can be clustered into literature, history, social science, education, and feminist and minority perspectives, each of these can be differentiated further. Even a cursory scanning of references and illustrations indicates that these disciplinary points of view often run relatively independent of each other. That independence seems limiting, if not tragic, for students and scholars who want diverse images and models of how life writing might be conceived and carried out, to enhance their own intellectual creativity. And lurking behind, almost hauntingly so, is the idea of autobiography, undermining many of the claims of detachment and specialization from the disciplines. Are our theories, as Valery suggests, "simple" extensions of our autobiographies? If so, what then becomes of social science?

Literary Biography

Reading literary biographies and accompanying statements of biographical method is exciting, especially if one is partial to competition, conflict, and sharp jousting. The contentiousness is neither superficial nor limited to domains and turf, but spills over into style and substance of the biography. Note the strongly stated positions of two eminent English intellectuals and biographers. In his preface to Eminent Victorians, Strachey (1918) reoriented English biography with his critique of traditional biographies: "Those two fat volumes with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead—who does not know them, with their ill-digested masses of material, their slipshod style, their tone of tedious panegyrich, their lamentable lack of selection, of detachment, of design?" (p. viii). In his view, "it is perhaps as difficult to write a good life as it is to live one."

In 1932, G. M. Trevelyan, in a new preface to an older biography (1876) seemed to write almost in rebuttal and in elaboration to Strachey. He comments regarding the "life and letters" biography:

My father [G. O. Trevelyan] certainly chose the form of biography most suitable to his uncle [Lord Macaulay]. He had not Boswell's rare gift of reproducing the essence of conversation, nor did Macaulay's real strength lie, like Dr. Johnson's in his tongue, but rather in his pen. His letters would reveal him and amuse the reader. It would have been equally beside the mark to treat Macaulay in a subjective, psychological character sketch, such as "the new biography" prefers, with the documents and letters omitted. Macaulay was not subtle enough for such subtleties, and his letters are much too good to miss. His description of his interview with the clergyman who thought Napoleon was the Beast in Revelations (p. 342) both amuses us more and tells us more about Macaulay than a page of psychological analysis. In this book the man lives and speaks for himself. (pp. v-vi)

In this short paragraph, Trevelyan raises a much more complex set of events facing the biographer: the special talents of the biographer, the special strengths of the subject, the importance of an interpretive character sketch versus letting the individual speak for himself, and the need for or desirability of a psychological analysis.

The debate continues to the present. Other perspectives are possible as well. More recently, Horner (1987), in her brief introduction to the Radcliffe Biography Series, has noted that "fine biographies give us both a glimpse of ourselves and a reflection of the human spirit. Biography illuminates history, inspires by example, and fires the imagination to life's possibilities. Good biography can create lifelong models for us?" (p. ix). That position opens further doors insofar as it is reminiscent of Kluckhohn's (1949) powerful statement of anthropology being a "mirror of man." Concepts and metaphors of biography run in many directions.

Earlier transformations occurred as well. Boswell's Life of Johnson dominated the English scene after its publication in 1791. Rogers, in an introduction to the 1980 Oxford University Press edition, comments on the book with phrases such as "lonely eminence," "towered over lesser works," and "dominated the skyline" of biography. In my view, Boswell's own eight-page introduction is a marvelous and strikingly modern essay in its own right. He presents a view of his relationship to Johnson—in my words, that of "humble servant." He was a friend of some 20 years; had the biography in mind from the start; cleared his "rights of human subjects," in that Johnson knew what he was about; kept voluminous records of activities, conversations, and events; cautioned against "panegyrich"; urged the importance of chronology; argued the method of conversation as the method to "best display his character"; cited Plutarch on the importance of an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest as the door to an individual's "real" character; quoted Johnson about how to study and understand Johnson; and staked his territory vis-à-vis other biographers who knew Johnson less well. Boswell read widely and knew about biography; he reflected well upon the process, and he wrote a memorable biography.

Illuminating Boswell's eight pages is Edel's (1984) brilliant essay on Boswell. Here we find Boswell arranging meetings, setting scenes, and determining the course of conversations—shades of Monet arranging a Giverny to enhance his lily ponds! Who and what anything in biography one's own intelligencers' views of the work, gathers data and simple and esoteric so the best one can. And trating, and terrifying certainty.

So change and content existed for centuries, irapy. Further impli seem to follow on the ablations of intellectual dominates multiple al tion, and creativity, ra Artistry as well as fac ally, in varying pro Granite and rainbows important generalization to write lives.

History

History lies somewhere in the social science in a disciplinary sense, as our int cate. In a series of the Stone (1981) has add to the social science of prosopography in slowing emphasis on the "prosopography" mane here. In resur "group biography," in temporary importance.

The collective stuff leads to insight into problems in history. The will in the motives, persons key individual actors fi torical events. Private different facet of Polit spee. And it is women who are imp people who surround th Stone argues that not o but group biography, a further dimension. Interactions from old strongly agree.7 Seco raphy gives insight it social structure and s overlapping boards, cot relations are built on ing together for their o
Biographical Method

History

History lies somewhere between the humanities and the social sciences. However, construed in a disciplinary sense, history has claims on biography, as our introductory definitions indicate. In a series of three major essays, Lawrence Stone (1981) has addressed the relationship of history to the social sciences, the nature and place of prosopography in historical thinking, and the changing emphasis on narration in history. But it is the "prosopography" essay that is most germane here. In resurrecting the classical label for "group biography," Stone argues for its contemporary importance.

The collective study of lives, Stone asserts, leads to insight into two of the most basic problems in history. The roots of political actions lie in the motives, personalities, and characters of key individual actors in any set of important historical events. Private events and papers relate a different facet of politics than do public events and speeches. And it is not only the great men and women who are important, but also the other people who surround them in complex social events. Stone argues that not only is biography important, but group biography, that is, prosopography, adds a further dimension. The social and symbolic interactions from other social sciences would strongly agree. Second, the study of group biography gives insight into the larger problems of social structure and social mobility. Networks, overlapping boards, connections, and family relationships are built on individual people interacting together for their own interests. Mapping those careers and linkages is an important means of understanding.

In a small way, we found this kind of approach, what we called life histories of a group of educational administrators and teachers who had created the innovative Kensington Elementary School, to be a powerful way of understanding the rise and fall of the school and the complexities of educational innovation and reform (Smith et al., 1986; Smith, Dwyer, Prunty, & Kleine, 1988; Smith, Prunty, Dwyer, & Kleine, 1987). Overall we blended history, ethnography, and life history as inquiry methods. Part of our rationale concerned the idea of a case study, a bounded system, in our view. The individual life history pieces or brief biographies were interlinked because of the time the staff taught and administered together in the Kensington Elementary School and the Milford School District. That linkage presented possibilities of understanding beyond any one individual biography. Powerful group patterns emerged in their lives.

One of Stone’s conclusions is that group biography can link together "constitutional and institutional history" and "personal biography," two of the oldest and best developed parts of the historian’s craft, but ones that have run too independently of each other. Biography becomes not an end in itself, but a helpful element in the pursuit of other ends. In addition, the rise of oral history, investigative journalism in the political domain, and the making of archives into presidential libraries offers an array of possibilities to the historian as a life writer. Old ideas and methods take on a fresh look and open up imaginative possibilities in new contexts.

Social Science Perspectives

Although variation exists among social scientists, most argue that biography should move beyond narration and storytelling of the particular into more abstract conceptualizations, interpretations, and explanations. Writing lives can serve multiple purposes. In general, "scientists" seek patterns in the forms of concepts, hypotheses, theories, and metaphors. These patterns are both the fruits of scientific inquiry and practice and the stimulus for further inquiry and improved practice. For convenience, I divide the social scientists by discipline—anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists. Some might argue that a trichotomy of conservative, liberal, and radical is a more powerful split. And others see the paradigmatic assumptions—positivism, neopositivism, interpretivism, and critical theory as more powerful organizing conceptions. Finding the joints at which to cut "nature" seems more and more difficult. Some would argue that Plato was wrong—at least for social science and the humanities.
Anthropologists. Anthropologists have had a long relationship with biography, mostly under the rubrics of "life histories" and "culture and personality." Langness (1965: Langness & Frank, 1981) presents an overview of this history and the multiple approaches being used. To pick only one strand, Oscar Lewis and Robert Redfield illustrate some of the excitement in the field. Both did ethnographies of Tepoztlán, attempts at a total view, Redfield's (1930) in the 1920s and Lewis's (1951) "restudy" two decades later. But the views were different: the positive side, bright view of Redfield contrasted with the dark side, nether view of Lewis. And that posed a severe intellectual problem for holistic anthropologists. Redfield (1955) responded with The Little Community, one of the most provocative and, I would maintain, underappreciated methodological books in social science. Essentially, he argued for a half dozen approaches for studying the small community. Three chapters are particularly important for the interpretations here—"A Typical Biography," "A Kind of Person," and "An Outlook on Life." The sequence of events as an individual passes through a culture during the course of a life is one view of that culture. And the resulting kind of person and his or her outlook on life are related additional ways of viewing a culture. These views play off against ecological, social structural, and historical perspectives. Cultures can be written through lives. And that is part of some of the best of Lewis's later work, life stories of individuals and families who moved from rural Tepoztlán to urban Mexico City. In Five Families (1959) and The Children of Sanchez (1961), Lewis tape-recorded individual life stories and, with only minor editing, presented them as documents of lives, "multiple autobiographies," to use his label. Out of this work came the controversial conception of the "culture of poverty." Valentine (1968) raised a "critique and counterproposals" of Lewis's use of the long autobiographical life story data for the kind of theoretical interpretations lying within the conception of the "culture of poverty." After writing one of the most autobiographically laden accounts of fieldwork ever presented in his "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock-fight" (in Geertz, 1973), Geertz, in a more recent book, Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author (1988), faces directly the issue of the dual role of the anthropological investigator between the horns of the "other," the individual or the culture being studied, and the "text," the narrative written about the world "out there." With his usual persuasive style, he makes the point that the reader's acceptance of the text occurs not because of its factual weight or the theoretical places being created, but rather because of its narrative strength, based on rhetorical devices, convincing the reader that he, the anthropologist, was really there. "Vas you dere Sharlie?" is his paraphrase of an earlier literary statement. And what better, in his earlier "Deep Play," than the scramble by Geertz and his wife to escape the police breaking up the cockfight and the charade of having tea with a local dignitary when all the postfight commotion was occurring. Geertz's "host" had not only been at the cockfight but had helped organize it. Geertz's more recent analysis, without reference to the early piece, is a vivid exposition of that earlier writing strategy. For Geertz the incident was a major breakthrough in community acceptance of his fieldwork. For the reader, it authenticated everything substantive he had to say about Bali. I was left with the feeling, "After that episode, how could he have gotten anything wrong?" But Geertz in 1988 writes not only of the relationship between the investigator and the community or individual being studied, but mainly of the relationship between the investigator and the kind of text he or she has written. Although not intended as biography, the narrative of his argument is carried by the intellectual and professional lives of four major anthropologists—Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Benedict. The writing of lives can and does serve many purposes. Recently, Rabinow (1977) and Crapanzano (1980), both writing Moroccan culture and biography, suggest difficulties and creative possibilities in understanding and blending life writing and cultural analysis. The identities of literature and science are lost and recreated brilliantly.

Psychologists. Psychologists have trouble with biography. On the one hand, psychoanalytic literature has influenced countless life writers; Leon Edel is one of the more noteworthy. With a psychoanalytic perspective, almost as a wand, he probes problems, issues, and interpretations with ease and facility as he writes biographies, critiques biographies, and surveys the tremendous volume of literature on biography. But academic psychologists have never lived easily with psychoanalysis. On the other hand, too, psychologists have a passion for truth, and a particular kind of truth at that, exemplified in experimentation, quantification, and tested propositions. Some see psychology as physics writ large. Garry (1954, 1957), citing varied attempts at quantification of life documents, such as graphology, content analysis, and discomfort-relief quotients, turns his hand to issues of personality in biography. Though raised in that tradition, I now find it chilling to the creativity involved in the writing of lives.

A kind of middle ground is found in the work of Gordon Allport and Henry Murray. Allport, an out-of-step third-force psychologist, produced a fascinating set of books relevant to biography. His well-received Personality (1937) was fol-
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lowed by his classic The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science (1942), and the brilliant Letters from Jenny (1965). In the last, he presented and then explored a large collection of letters written by a woman named Jenny, mostly to her son and daughter-in-law. They are vivid, troubling, introspective accounts of both her life as a working woman and mother and her accompanying mental states. The exploration involved Allport in a consideration of several competing theories for understanding and explaining the letters. Existential psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis vied with his own structural-dynamic approach. He concluded with an estimate of Jenny’s mental health. The life story, told mostly in the letters, with minimal commentary, was in the service of general theory. Allport also took up the challenge of Stefan Zweig in his infamous quote regarding writers such as Proust and Flaubert: “Writers like these are giants in observation and literature, whereas in psychology the field of personality is worked by lesser men, mere flies, who have the safe anchorage of a frame of science in which to place their petty platitudes and minor heresies” (quoted in Allport, 1960, p. 6). Allport (1960) makes the case for both literature and psychology in his “Personality: A Problem for Science or a Problem for Art?”

Henry Murray’s contribution to biography also lies in his explorations in personality, and in a book by the same title (Murray et al., 1938); in his invention of the TAT, the thematic apperception test; and in his collaboration with a remarkable group of colleagues and students who have pursued problems in the nature of lives. With the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn he edited the well-recognized Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1953). Concepts such as needs, presses, proceedings, serials, plans, schedules, ego strength, and proactive systems guided the work of several generations of American psychologists interested in lives and life writing. Lives in Progress (White, 1952) is a major illustration of the post-Murray approach. The eclectic emphasis on biology, family, social circumstances, and the individuals themselves appears and reappears. Erikson, another former Murray colleague, in his Childhood and Society (1963) and his Young Man Luther (1962) brought the “eight ages of man,” “identity crises,” and other conceptualizations to life writing. The ideas of Murray and others in the psychobiography and psychohistory traditions are extended in McAdams and Ochberg (1989) and Runyan (1982, 1988).

In the more recent Seasons of a Man’s Life, Levinson (1978) accents the stages in adult life and the difficult transitions—most noteworthy, the midlife crisis—as a framework for the consideration of a life. The dilemma of the general and the particular appears once again. Academic psychologists tend to pursue the former with greater zeal. Although major disagreements exist here, Coles, in a series of books that includes Women of Crisis (Coles & Coles, 1980), attacks vigorously the social scientists and the theorists, even while developing and presenting, mostly implicitly, his own more subtle theoretical point of view (Smith et al., 1986, pp. 21-23). It is an exciting world; the granite and rainbow dichotomy does not rest easily within psychology.

As much as any disciplinary group, psychologists have used biography in the service of other ends. One illustration must suffice. In his very stimulating Contrary Imaginations, Liam Hudson (1966) collected short, open-ended autobiographical statements of clever English schoolboys. “Just describe those aspects of your life which seem to you interesting or important” provoked responses useful in clarifying major hypotheses in his study. More far-reaching was his turning the autobiographical perspective on himself and his career shifts from experimental psychology to a more humanistic kind of psychology in his The Cult of the Fact (1972). He sets his authorial position with a powerful initial sentence: “The story begins in Cambridge, in the spring of 1968; my eleventh year in Cambridge, and my third in the superlative if stagey ambiance of King’s College” (p. 1). For anyone who has spent any time in Cambridge, the invitation is irresistible. Insights and personal help come in strange ways! I have now a major lead toward revising and extending my Doing Ethnographic Biography: A Reflective Practitioner at Work During a Spring in Cambridge (1992). Serendipity once again! Psychologists really should have less trouble with biography.

Sociologists. Like psychologists and anthropologists, sociologists have been ambivalent toward biography. But writing lives, in the form of life histories, became part of the world of the Chicago school with the publication of Clifford Shaw’s The Jack-Roller in 1930. And life history was only one of the broader category of qualitative inquiries, labeled better as “case studies.” From the Gold Coast to the Ghetto, they were to have a permanent impact on sociological thought and method. And out of such work, and the seminal thought of George Herbert Mead, was to come the very influential symbolic interactionism as a social science point of view. In two short introductions, one a republication of Shaw’s book and the other to his own collected essays, Howard Becker (1966, 1970) makes the case for both this kind of “close-up” sociology and the place of biographical and autobiographical life histories in sociology.

I can remember reading several of the Chicago case study books in a general sociology course when I was an undergraduate, being absorbed in
them and the four wishes of Thomas as discussed in Waller (1932), but not being able to integrate all that into the kind of "scientific" psychology I was to learn in graduate school. Now, several decades later, as a latter-day practitioner of case studies of schools, curricula, and school districts, and life histories of teachers, and now of more formal biography, I find the power of the Chicago perspective awesome.

Becker makes the argument for life histories as part of a "mosaic" of community and institutional investigations, as important "touchstones" for considering any abstract theory of person and community, and the testing of implicit assumptions about human beings in the larger sociological studies. Biography has an overriding dimension, the chronology between birth and death. In a social science that often makes pleas for "process" interpretations, the clash between the synchronic and the diachronic usually ends in the victory of the more structural synchronic. Biography, and history as well, opens the theorist to data organized on a diachronic timeline. In addition, biography with a concern for the way a specific individual perceives and construes the world also moves the sociological interpreter toward the subject's perspective rather than the observer's point of view, a major issue labeled by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz as "experience near" versus "experience distant" conceptualizations.

Following in these same traditions, Denzin (1989) raises his sociological perspective as "interpretive biography," the creating of literary and narrative accounts and stories of lived experience. He pursues in great analytic detail the development of taxonomies and concepts; the multiple ways lives can be studied, construed, and written; and the implications of taking one perspective or another. "Turning points," the never-ending construction and reconstruction of lives, and obituaries as documents (that is, brief life statements), the cultural categories we use in describing lives, and the ethical responsibilities in studying lives, suggest the creative range of ideas his brand of sociology brings to the biographical task. In much the same tradition, with some stronger overtones of radicalism as well, Bertoaux (1981) edited an international collection of essays, Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences. Sociology is reclaiming one of its important roots. C. Wright Mills (1959) would be pleased as history, biography, and social structure have moved a step closer to productive syntheses.

Taking the sociological position just a shade more toward journalism are life writers such as Studs Terkel (1970, 1972), who describes his study Hard Times as an "oral history." In a page or two to a half dozen pages he presents brief vignettes of the lives of individuals who lived through the Depression years of the 1930's in the United States. One might see it as a collection of "episodes" in autobiographical life stories, with some biographical editing by Terkel from his tape-recorded interviews. In its introduction, labeled "A Personal Memoir," he classifies the effort this way:

This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic. In recalling an epoch, some thirty, forty, years ago, my colleagues experienced pain, in some instances; exhilaration, in others. Often it was a fusing of both. A hesitancy, at first, was followed by a flow of memories; long ago hurts and small triumphs. Honors and humiliations. There was laughter, too. (Terkel, 1970, p. 17)

Inner perspectives, experience near phrasings and conceptualizations, and tidal waves of feeling and emotion present individuals and their lives. These coalesce into larger images and patterns. Whether journalism, or oral history, or a kind of sociology, the labels seem less relevant than the power Terkel brings to the reporting and evoking of images. Most social scientists would envy his ability to capture his focus in Working:

It is about search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book. (Terkel, 1972, p. xii)

Creativity and insight come in varied forms. Honoring them is high on my list of life-writing priorities.

Feminist and Minority Perspectives

Anyone who has ever felt left out, ignored, or powerless has the beginnings of an understanding of the feminist and minority perspectives that have arisen in recent decades with great vigor and anger in the field of biography and autobiography. From the Oxford English Dictionary's early limiting definitions of who is included and excluded to the more personal reports of experience, the argument grows. In a small but poignant and potent personal experience, while walking through the corridors of the Cambridge University Library, actually from the Manuscripts Room on the third floor to the Tea Room in the basement, while working on the biography of Nora Barlow, I noted an exhibition of books from the seventeenth century focusing on the "Worthies of England". (Smith, 1992). Though "worthies" was a label new to me, it seems to say it all. In that era it was clear who was important and who was not important. That human fundament the truth un

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Examining issues in texture, agency, self-definition, so it is argued, was enhanced by the writing of narratives of all kinds of women. Images, models exist in the life-writing of women, reflective upon those ataristic accounts of their own lives. "Origins" chapter of the F (1989) book, Interpretations in lifestyles, with learnings and deep dissatisfactions arrayed in conceptual meaning of the experiencing occurs with contradictions and arguments for viewing or feeling or behaving to, constructing and natures, and the troubling of disciplinary training in social sciences.

Ultimately, the Person tured its book around for concepts: context, narrative relations, and truths. Experiences" of the analysis of life stories in particular conditions that any moment in time. They have shapes to which one's lives flow, are rich with an interpreter relations multiple people involved in, critiquing, and meaning, and also the comp individuals themselves who multiply ways and works of lives from its own experience and so from both her essential reality.

If those abstractions, lose their concrete mean to go to any of the in particulars. For instance, terrips Stanley (1984) (diaries. The diaries were diaries that are and interpreted by the editors recently, the diaries have Swindells, and given add the Personal Narratives C
was important and who decided on the criteria of importance. That human experience is gendered is the fundamental truth underlying the feminist perspective. Race and class as categories of individuals echo, follow quickly upon, similar assumptions.

Examining issues in equity, power, social structure, agency, self-definition, and their interrelations, so it is argued by feminists, will be enhanced by the writing of all kinds of personal narratives of all kinds of lives of all kinds of women. Images, models, and insights for change exist in the life-writing narratives and critical reflections upon those stories. A gripping particularistic account of these issues appears in the "Origins" chapter of the Personal Narratives Group (1989) book, Interpreting Women's Lives. Variations in lifestyles, with their attendant satisfactions and deep dissatisfaction, appear along with an array of conceptual attempts to broaden the meaning of the experiences recounted. This broadening occurs with counter-narratives as illustrations and arguments for women who are not thinking or feeling or behaving as they are "supposed to," constructing and negotiating new alternatives, and the troubling constraints posed by one's disciplinary training in the humanities versus the social sciences.

Ultimately, the Personal Narrative Group structured its book around four major sensitizing concepts: context, narrative form, narrator-interpreter relations, and truths. Each of these "lenses" or "pieces of madras cloth" illuminates the meanings of women's life stories. Context refers to the particular conditions that prevail in any society at any moment in time. Narrative forms, the fluid shapes into which one's creative constructions of lives flow, are rich with alternatives. The narrator-interpreter relations conception addresses the multiple people involved in living, narrating, writing, critiquing, and meaning making in biography, and also the complex interrelationships of the individuals themselves. Truths refers to "the multiplicity of ways in which a woman's life story reveals and reflects important features of her conscious experience and social landscape, creating from both her essential reality" (p. 14).

If those abstractions, retold here for brevity, lose their concrete meaning, the reader has only to go to any of the individual essays for the particulars. For instance, Swindells's essay interpretes Stanley (1984) on the Hannah Cullwick diaries. The diaries were written by a Victorian maid servant, a "maid-of-all-work," at the urging of A. J. Munby, "man of two worlds," her male exploiter and later husband (if these be different). Recently they were published by a feminist press and interpreted by the editor (Stanley, 1984). More recently, the diaries have been interpreted by Swindells, and given additional interpretation by the Personal Narratives Group editors. Now each reader, with the help of Derek Hudson's (1972) biography of Munby and Hiley's (1979) book of photographs (mostly Munby's) Victorian Working Women: Portraits From Life, can make his or her own interpretation. It is an incredible story—or set of interconnected stories. The exciting complexities of "auto/biographical" methods, to use Stanley's phrasing, in the late twentieth century are readily apparent.

Alternative, more conventional if not more tempered, accounts appear in such highly discussed books as Mary Catherine Bateson's (1990) Composing a Life and Carolyn Heilbrun's (1988) Writing a Woman's Life. Bateson's five biographical stories of lives raise conceptualizations such as "unfolding stories," "improvisation" versus "a vision already defined," "patchwork quilt" as a metaphor for a life, and a "rethinking of the concept of achievement." I was reminded of an earlier and personally influential book by Gruenberg and Krech (1952), The Many Lives of Modern Woman, which provided a metaphor and guided the decisions of some of us a generation or two ago.

Heilbrun's opening sentence gives pause to anyone contemplating any aspect of the topic "biography and women." She begins:

There are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process. (p. 11)

"Nostalgia," "anger," and "taking control of their own lives" are concepts that appear early and throughout her analysis. Early autobiographies by women, and many of the more recent as well, read "flat" to Heilbrun, especially as she contrasts the autobiographies with the more emotional books of letters. Perhaps it is my contentiousness, but I find some of her interpretations open to further exploration. She cites the differences between two of May Sarton's autobiographical books: Plant Dreaming Deep (1968) tends toward a positive, upbeat flavor, whereas Journal of a Solitude (1973) tends to probe the nether side of life, but, in my view, tragedy as well as anger. And for reasons not clear to me as reader, Heilbrun does not mention the earlier I Knew a Phoenix: Sketches for an Autobiography (1959), in which Sarton draws portraits of her parents: George Sarton, the historian of science, and Mabel Ellis Sarton, painter, interior decorator, and artisan, and the joys and despair of Europe in the World War I era. Her own youth is caught in a series of sketches, "The Education of a Poet." May Sarton, as person, writer, and text, seems much more complex than
Heilbrun’s brief comments and interpretations indicate.
And Heilbrun is very complex as well. I encountered her first as writer of the introductory essays to two of Vera Brittain’s Testament books, a kind of “documentary” history through autobiography (see, e.g., Heilbrun, 1981). Much of Writing a Woman’s Life appears there. Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby seem to me as a bit more than casual observer, to have influenced Heilbrun mightily. More recently I have started reading the Amanda Cross mystery novels. Picture this: Heilbrun writes under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross (mystery writers don’t get tenure in literature at Columbia, she says); the heroine of the novels is Kate Fansler, a detective and university literary critic, and in one of the more recent novels, The Players Come Again (1990), heroine Fansler is writing a biography of a woman who is allegedly the author of her husband’s world-famous stream-of-consciousness novel. Perhaps all this literary writing will be clearer when I have read the rest of Heilbrun’s long series of books and essays. For the moment—what a provocative set of ambiguous interpretive possibilities!

Further, what Heilbrun calls “the claim of achievement, the admission of ambition, the recognition that accomplishment” was earned appeared in the letters of some writers but not in their formal autobiographies. In her view, scripts, other than reflecting men’s stories, for telling life stories seldom existed in the lives of eminent women. In my view, Healey’s (1986) Wives of Fame gives the beginning of a kind of redressing of the comment “I didn’t know he had a wife” regarding Jenny—and Marx; and Mary—and Livingstone; and Emma—and Darwin. Heilbrun’s own anecdotes and stories continue excitedly, culminating in statements about aging, courage, freedom, and endings. She argues that being 50 years old is an important transition time. To a social scientist, many of these interpretations are empirically testable propositions. Another agenda?

The life-writing literary by minority and ethnic groups is immense and growing well. From the early autobiographies of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass to the more recent ones by Malcolm X and Maya Angelou, the multiple definitions of the black experience have continued to cumulate. Butterfield’s Black Autobiography in America (1974) presents a vivid historical picture of major transitions from the early slave narrative period, to one of search, and now to the period of rebirth, to use his phrases. The first sentence of the introduction presages the overall perspective of the book:

George Orwell’s image of the future in 1984 was of a boot stamping on the human face forever. He could have used the same image to represent the Negro past in America, fitting the boot easily to the foot of a slavetreader, overseer, master, policeman, soldier, vigilante, capitalist, and politician. (p. 1)

Overall, his interpretation of autobiography is a mix of history and literature and an attempt to integrate “objectives and subjective awareness.” In his later, more interpretive chapters, Butterfield analyzes issues of constructing black identity in terms of politics, separatism, and revolution among many young black writers. In his essay “The Language of Black Satire” he cites powerful short excerpts from Cleaver, Scale, and others, most of whom spent time in prison. Butterfield’s “history as subjective experience” is an exercise in a set of propositions linking personal experience to individuality, an awakening of a “truer and better self,” and the birth of a new world. Example follows example.

As I read Haley’s epilogue at the end of The Autobiography of Malcolm X, multiple “biographical method” questions arose. In what sense is the book Malcolm X’s autobiography and in what sense is it Haley’s biography of him? Is Stanley’s phrasing “auto/biography” the more viable alternative? And what should we make of the point in time in which the book was narrated and written? While the book was in process, Malcolm X parted company with Elijah Muhammad. The climax of the book was now different. Should the early materials be rewritten? Malcolm said no. What problems were created for Haley, the writer of the autobiography? The questions run on insistently.

As I reread Anne Moody’s Coming of Age in Mississippi (1968), a larger essay loomed in my mind. Life stories can be a powerful influence on creativity, and that is no mean accomplishment. I believe it was her four-part table of contents—“Childhood,” “High School,” “College,” and “The Movement”—and the vivid vignettes and brief stories from the text per se that seemed so simply similar to many of my interests and perspectives. I saw the possibilities of comparisons and contrasts between her book and the very different but equally powerful Period Piece: A Cambridge Childhood, Gwen Raverat’s (1952) auto/biography of the Darwin family at the turn of the century. In addition, our multiple ethnographic case studies of pupils, teachers, and schools and in and around the metropolitan area of St. Louis and the central Midwest in the United States, all of which have biographical and autobiographical strands, would provide a large further comparison and contrast. Bridging some of these differences is Wilma Wells, my colleague and coauthor of “Difficult to Reach, Maintain, and Help” Urban Families in PAT: Issues, Dilemmas, Strategies, and Resolutions in Parent Education (Smith & Wells, 1990). This was very heavily an auto/biographical account of struggles to educate poor rearing practices. As I family, schooling, class, generation, and a essay and this paragraph note for a new, autobiograph bring together numerous solved problems, from this point I feel I can narrate. But Anne Mcwell, in St. Louis’s urb

Professional Education

Much of recent life writing carries the same feminist and minority presence among the disenfranchised with alternative visions. Kottkamp (1992) gave subtitle The Missing Voice. Several strands seem representatve of a first strain such as Ball and Gooc Lives and Careers and Teachers’ Lives. Conlives in the accenting of the daily give and take of schools. This is a domain that experience: form and school innovation, central office administration, and subject major the most telling illustrati of “teacher-proof” curricular specialists. The posed to be so powerful incompetent teachers, li spoil them in the transden. Similarly, the fact and change, exemplifie search, development, and the classroom teacher as the convery belt of sci: Charlie Chaplin on the a Times suggest the frenetic life of the teacher. Teach change both the teachers categional system of which minority group is seeking; A second strand with recent flowering is made alternatve visions. A. S.
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struggles to educate poor urban mothers in child-rearing practices. As I think about such work, family, schooling, class, and caste cut across gender, generations, and continents. Now, the larger essay and this paragraph seem like a promissory note for a new, autobiographical book that will bring together numerous loose ends, nagging unresolved problems, from a professional lifetime. At this point I feel I am co-opting someone else’s narrative. But Anne Moody is alive, and not so well, in St. Louis’s urban ghetto in 1993.

The influential life-writing literature from the feminist and minority perspectives reflects back on some of the intellectual cynicism regarding autobiography. Some believe that autobiography is impossible, as noted earlier in this essay. Cynicism has its own complexities and power.

Professional Education

Much of recent life writing in professional education carries the same intellectual flavor of the feminist and minority perspective, finding voice among the disenfranchised, the powerless, or those with alternative visions. Marilyn Cohn and Robert Kottkamp (1992) gave their book Teachers the subtilte The Missing Voice in Education.

Several strands seem especially important. Representative of a first strand are collections of essays such as Ball and Goodson’s (1985) Teachers’ Lives and Careers and Goodson’s (1992) Studying Teachers’ Lives. Conceptually the major thrust lies in the accenting of “agency,” of teachers in the daily give and take of teaching in classrooms and schools. This is particularly important in a domain that experiences fads of curriculum reform and school innovation under the control of central office administrators, university educators, and subject matter specialists. Perhaps the most telling illustration was the development of “teacher-proof” curricula in the 1960s by disciplinary specialists. The new materials were supposed to be so powerful and well done that even incompetent teachers, like you and me, could not spoil them in the transmission from text to students. Similarly, the field of school innovation and change, exemplified by the “RD&D” (research, development, and diffusion) model, placed the classroom teacher as one technocratic spot in the conveyor belt of school change. Images of Charlie Chaplin on the assembly line in Modern Times suggest the frenetic, but not so hilarious, life of the teacher. Teacher life stories attempt to change both the teachers themselves and the educational system of which they are a part. Another minority group is seeking a voice.

A second strand with both distant roots and recent flowering is made up of those teachers with alternative visions. A. S. Neill is best known for his Summerhill (1960), but even more impressive is his A Dominate’s Log and the other two dominie books (see Neill, 1975). The Log contains all the significant material that he was not permitted to include in the official records he had to keep for the inspectorate. Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s Teacher (1963) brings a personal view of New Zealand, multiculturalism, and a more organic way of teaching. And the “romantics” of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Hentoff (1966), Hernden (1966, 1971), and Holt (1964), present powerful life-writing statements. Nonmainstream voices entered into the dialogue about schooling.

A third strand that seldom is described as life writing is the growing interest in “action research.” As described by Elliott (1991) and others, action research involves teachers studying their own teaching. In a cycle that involves proposing, planning, implementing, observing, recording (through diaries and journals), reflecting, and writing, teachers have begun to talk about their teaching, their hopes and desires, the immediate context of a particular group of pupils, a particular set of curriculum materials, and a particular school with its particular principal and staff of colleagues. Although the focus is usually on an innovative teaching strategy or piece of curriculum, I would argue that a more powerful way of thinking about action research is to construe the activity as “really” a piece of teacher autobiography. And if this be true, then action researchers should be including more personal context, larger chunks of autobiography, in their research statements. For educators, the epigraph from Valéry with which I began this section needs to be extended beyond “theory” to “practice” as well.

Conclusions

No foundation. All the way down the line.

William Saroyan,
The Time of Your Life, 1939

Several conclusions, not quite foundations, in the form of patterns, tentative generalizations, or lessons seem to follow reasonably closely upon the arguments presented in this chapter. In wrestling with the theme and audience of this chapter I found I wanted to say something of the multiple and conflicting definitions and perspectives of life writing; I wanted to address the process or craft aspects of doing biography; and finally I wanted to acquaint any one disciplinarian with images of life writing from other disciplines. Eventually, integration or talking across boundaries was on my agenda. My focal audiences, as frequently is
the case, are my graduate students interested in doing one form or another of qualitative inquiry. They seem not too far from a larger population of students and scholars.

Underlying this essay is an image of an ideal. For reasons I understand only partially, I am drawn to those scholars who write interesting and important biographies, who seem to know huge amounts of the relevant literature on life writing, and who reflect insightfully upon the craft, the process of doing biography—an awesome and nearly unattainable ideal! In attempting to actualize such an ideal, I have raised a few of the older, more classical biographers and their perspectives as well as the more contemporary. In addition, and as part of a perspective on the importance of the individual as agent, I have written in the first person and about some of my own efforts, even though the chapter is part of a "handbook," which usually assumes a more detached perspective.

For the educational and social science researcher interested in qualitative methods, biography—and its variants, autobiography, life history, and life story—seems a rich and only partially exploited form of inquiry for reaching multiple intellectual goals and purposes. In her recent book, Stanley (1992) makes a strong case for the label "auto/biographical." In an important summary, Lancy (1993) suggests "personal accounts." Life writing might be the more apt generic label.

Although this discussion has not been organized explicitly on a historical or chronological basis, it is clear that the nature, purpose, form, and function of life writing have evolved over recent years and decades, as well as centuries. For scholars with even a bit of an innovative or experimental set of values, current biographical forms and formats should be seen as only tentative guidelines toward their own creative inquiry endeavors. Any constraining formalistic definitions and rules about the nature and function of biography seem out of keeping with the vigor of intellectual activity under way.

Almost as a corollary of the prior generalizations, biographical inquiry is in high contention among scholars within and among different disciplines—literature, history, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Each of these traditions has evolved its own standards and perspectives on life writing. Conflict seems everywhere. Each discipline, and subgroups within disciplines, vents its anger and displeasure upon other groups and traditions. Ecumenical approaches often are not seen as desirable. Large personal, professional, and disciplinary issues and interests are at stake.

The best counsel seems to be, Realize that this is happening, come to know as much of the variety as time permits, and integrate the differences in ways that contribute to one's own creativity in life writing.

The kind of data drawn upon by different researchers—letters, interviews, documents, self-statements, and so on—as they construct their biographies will vary in amount, quality, relevance, and perceived significance. Autobiographies—sometimes as statements in their own right and sometimes as data for other statements—seem to draw disdain from several quarters and high support from others. Critics and evaluators will need to use their own judgment, just as the biographer per se must do, to assess the meaning and the quality of the effort. In my view, building a rationale for any particular form of life writing as legitimate inquiry seems possible in the diversity of orientations presented here. The important test case for an academic might well be: What variants are permissible as Ph.D. dissertations? Clearly, formal biographies of eminent white males qualify. But what of a Moody or a latter-day Cullwick? Would their autobiographies or diaries count? I would argue yes, but others might disagree. And the debate would continue: Purposes? Limits? Criteria?

In my view, doing biography is an active construction-activity, from the picking of a hero or heroine to the seeking of data pools, to the selection of issues and themes, and to the final image or portrait that is drawn. The importance of serendipity in selecting a subject for a biography, in determining a particular theme and perspective, and in working one's way through the doing of the biography needs to be noted as a significant possibility in both purpose and strategy. While searching for one solution, life writers seem to find other things. Serendipity needs to be contrasted with more formal intellectual approaches, which are often, in my view, an illustration of reconstructed logic rather than logic in use. Theories of biography remain partial and limited in scope.

One of my major aspirations in this essay has been the presentation of ideas and people who espouse the ideas, that is, the perspectives that will "move along" the inquiries of the readers. At a minimum, if I have intrigued any of you who have never done life histories or biographies, or those of you who have never read Bowen, Clifford, or Edel, among others, to begin those journeys, this essay will have been a success.

Finally, many social scientists who worry about the relationships among inquiry, theory, and practice speak of the importance of "sensitizing concepts," "models," and "metaphors" as aids to thinking about and doing practical activity. Engaging in life-writing inquiry is, in part, a craft, an instance of practice. In my interpretation of these views, I believe an essentially pragmatic perspective arises. I believe that the stories and ideas that one creates should be useful for solving further problems in one's professional life. Autobiography is writ large, at least in the case of another of the bioconceptions. This essay is intended to fall within

References

Allport, G. W. (1937). Pe...
is writ large, at least implicitly. Reflective practice is another of the broader and more significant conceptions. This essay on "biographical method" is intended to fall within these traditions.

Notes

1. A similar extended illustration could be drawn using the multiple life writings by and about a figure such as Virginia Woolf (1929, 1938, 1940). Bell's (1972) two-volume biography of Woolf contrasts sharply with the more recent biography by DeSalvo (1989), who accents a sexual abuse theme.

2. The Darwin illustration can be pursued further with such variants as Kohn (1985), Barrett (1977), Gruber (1981), Healey (1986), Marks (1991), Darwin and Seward (1903), F. Darwin (1909), and Barlow (1946, 1967).

3. My current views present here are in transformation once again as I participate in a Washington University faculty seminar on "autobiography." The stimulating discussion ranges across the humanities—comparative literature, performing arts, romance languages—and occasionally the social sciences.

4. Clifford (1970) tells a similar set of fascinating stories under the heading "the vague footnote," which sent him off to Wales in the 1930s.

5. Bowen (1968, p. 11) suggests an alternative typology: narrative, topical, or essay for forming and shaping the biography. See, for example, Surton's (1959) I Knew a Phoenix, which carries the subtitle Sketches for an Autobiography.

6. Even as this essay is being revised, my Washington University colleagues in the faculty seminar have inundated me with literally dozens (hundreds?) of references, especially from comparative literature, that I have never seen. It is a humbling experience.

7. A number of sources exist in the symbolic interactionist tradition; classically, Blumer's (1969) "Chicago school" of sociology's extension of George Herbert Mead is critical. Recently, Hargreaves (1986) has presented, especially for the educationist, a potent summary perspective with the title "Whatever Happened to Symbolic Interactionism?" Duxer's (1970) methodological book Elite and Specialized Interviewing is grounded in a similar view (see, e.g., p. 5).

8. The relationship of shorter biographical studies in the service of other inquiry approaches is a major intellectual and practical issue in itself. I have touched on it only briefly and in passing.

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