LIFE STORY RESEARCH
Reflections on biographical and narrative approaches

JULIA BRANNEN
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Spontaneous narratives

- Generated in the course of a semi structured interview
- In response to specific decontextualised questions
- Participants’ ‘readiness’ to be interviewed prompted by life course transitions
- Unpredictable and unexpected
The conditions for spontaneous narratives

• Not all take up the challenge

• Identifying the markers of the narrative voice

• A search for coherence out of incoherence

• Interviewer as catalyst and social medium where
  – interviewee has agreed that story is of interest
  – the interviewer gives interviewee autonomy to present their view of the world
Heroic story Migrant Irish grandfather
ESRC Study of Fathers over 3 Generations

- Variety of ways people respond to life story request
- Paradigmatic success story
- Connor’s story
  - Childhood marked by misfortune
  - Migrations
  - Opportunity to make a mark on world
  - ‘Never looked back’
How story fits teller’s current purposes

- Resistance to life review; wish for past to stay buried
- Boosts self at expense of others (Coleman 1991 on reminiscence groups)
- Closing down emotions (Craig 2000)
- Self as unchanging (Ricoeur 1985)
Closing down of narrative

Irish migrant grandfather, Connor’s life story

• Hints of a life untold

• Clues in initial statement (the past) ‘a different life altogether’

• Unfolding of small stories along the way (Phoenix 2009)

• Adherence to identity as given and unchanging (Ricoeur 1985)
Research design and approach

- Case studies of individuals and chains of related men
- Comparative approach
- Case selection critical
- Contextualisation and thick description
- Multi layered approach (data integration)
Biographic-Narrative Interview Method BNIM

- Initial invitation to tell a life story or story related to a particular theme
- Interviewer as listener
- Use of narrative questions
- Keep the gestalt of the story
- Give opportunities for additional narrative
Methods of analysis

• After the interview extensive field notes (research context, encounter, key themes)
• Create life history chronology
• Transcription and extend field notes
• Separate in initial analysis history from story
• Comparative analysis of histories across groups
• Comparative analysis of chains integrating history and story
Bringing biographical and narrative methods together

• Develop methodology
• Combine biography and autobiography
• Situate analyses in time and space
• Unfolding stories told in the present
• Enhance contextualisation
Contextualisation

- Biographic methods focus on wider structural context (macro, meso and micro social)
- Narrative methods focus on interview context
- Lack of attention to structural contextualisation
- Importance of wider context in study of transnational groups
- Strengthens understanding of agency
Bringing biographical and narrative methods together

• Offer new ways of bringing methods and data together
• Globalising world: interest in ‘experiences’ and trend / comparative data
• Offer a return to linked methods of famous cohort studies and mixed methods
• Guard against naïve prioritising of ‘voice’
• Make sociological imagination paramount
Bringing biographical and narrative methods together

Interplay between way people talk about experiences and structures

Art of re-presentation

Science of systematic analysis

No one method of doing this