



Qualitative Sociology Review

Volume II, Issue 1 – April 2006

Brian Roberts

University of Glamorgan, UK

Riitta Kyllönen

University of Tampere, Finland

Editorial Introduction: Special Issue – “Biographical Sociology”

This Special Issue presents some new developments in the area of Biographical Sociology – a field that has shown great expansion within the discipline and other social sciences. The Issue presents a selection of articles, which pick up a number of important shifts in the study of biography and should benefit readers who are already engaged in the field as well as those who are new to such study. We feel that the articles not only demonstrate some key methodological, theoretical and epistemological developments in the field but also push the boundaries of Biographical Sociology in raising important issues, questions and insights in relation to different substantive areas.

We have not sought a precise definition of Biographical Sociology. However, our approach has been informed by a number of conceptions of the individual-society relation. Biographical Sociology, in general terms, can be said to be an attempt to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future (Roberts, 2002: 1). An emphasis on the “biographical” in sociology is not simply the study of the individual life. Following Mills, we would argue that Biographical Sociology has a “task and a promise” in employing an “imagination” which:

enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals... enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society... [and] between ‘the personal troubles of milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’. (Mills, 1970: 11, 12, 14)

The challenge to the separation of single lives and social structure:

involves sociologists questioning and indeed rejecting conventional sharp distinctions between structure and action, and relatedly, individual and collective, as presenting an over-dichotomised view of social life. It means rejecting any notion that a ‘life’ can be understood as a representation of a single self in isolation from networks of interwoven biographies. (Stanley and Morgan, 1993: 2)

The exploration of the interplay of biography, history and structure is central to a Biographical Sociology. Conceptualisation of the social world primarily according to structure would omit the essential attention to “human joy and suffering” (Plummer, 2001: 6). A Biographical Sociology entails a “critical humanism” – “a longing for social

science to take more seriously its humanistic foundations and to foster styles of thinking that encourage the creative, interpretive story tellings of lives – with all the ethical, political and self-reflexive engagements that this will bring” (Plummer, 2001: 1).

The context of the current Special Issue is the contemporary position of the social sciences, which are facing a great challenge in analysing rapidly changing social and cultural horizons. We are not alone in arguing for a need to develop new vocabulary, concepts and categories, which would better grasp a social life that is less and less understandable through the old ideas and frameworks. Social research is attempting to meet the need to renovate its analytical tools and practices in order to produce more pertinent knowledge about the increasingly complex world. The question here is –“What has biographical research to offer in this task”?

The concerns of the Special Issue are twofold. First, to provide work that demonstrates the variety, strengths and developments within current Biographical Sociology. Secondly, to give a consideration of contributions from related disciplines that point out ways in which Biographical Sociology can benefit from work outside the discipline of sociology, and in turn, identify areas of possible collaboration.

Overview of the Special Issue – “Biographical Sociology”

The articles presented in this Special Issue reflect the new directions that are occurring in the field, following the “linguistic”, “narrative”, “performative”, “visual” and “digital” “turns” that have occurred in qualitative sociology and the wider discipline. In particular, the articles raise issues of representation and language, including the possibilities brought by digital technology and performance/aesthetics. The articles demonstrate the rewards and challenges of interdisciplinarity and the cross-fertilization of ideas and the influences from discourse, translation studies and artistic practice for a Biographical Sociology. Analytically, the articles focus on issues of identity “work”, “belonging” and “voice” in relation to text and to audiovisual data. And finally, they show new methodological developments – for instance, from participatory research, “relational aesthetics”, and “narrative-discourse” analysis. An interesting general feature of the articles is that they each draw on a number of these themes in pointing out theoretical and methodological ways forward for Biographical Sociology. While the focus of the articles is the possible contribution, for instance, of digital or art/performance for biographical research and theorisation, they also have implications for qualitative sociology – and for sociology and other disciplines more generally.

The articles offer contributions for expanding or transcending the borders of the traditional transcript based materials and the textual form of representation and analysis, towards *audiovisual* text, sound, and visual forms and practices. The promise of digital technologies relate to different phases of the research process in biographical research – indeed, for disrupting the traditional “linear” notion of the research process itself by an ongoing “dialogical” approach including the “researched”, researcher and audience. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, as an online journal, is well-placed to explore further the vast potential of new technologies – some indicated here – for biographical work and qualitative sociology as a whole.

Bogusia Temple, in her article “Representation across languages: biographical sociology meets translation and interpretation studies”, confronts the neglected issue in biographical research of using a language that is not the same for those who have spoken, the researcher and the intended audience. She draws upon researchers’ work within translation and interpretation studies which is exploring the complex issues arising from “representation across languages”. Various writers are challenging the bases of moving across languages, commonly into English, and offering a number of stimulating ideas. Using her own cross language research Temple assesses the work in translation and translations studies and the questions they raise for Biographical Sociology – in terms of the assumptions made in “translating” speech/texts, and associated issues that arise for meaning and representation.

Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton outline a “narrative-discursive” approach and its contribution to interviewing and interpretation within Biographical Sociology. They see “biographical work” “as part of the ongoing, interactive process through which identities are taken up”. Their article “Biographies in talk: a narrative-discursive research approach” is based on analyses of “biographical talk” from postgraduate Art and Design students and their “identity work”. The students employed “discursive resources”, including “interpretive repertoires” and “canonical narratives” in relation to “troubled identities”. Taylor and Littleton’s perspective centres on the reflexive work of the speaker in forming a biographical narrative - previous versions are both a “constraint” and a “source of continuity”.

Maggie O’Neill and Ramaswami Harindranath argue for the potential of combining a biographical approach with participatory action research (PAR) with reference to understanding the lived experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. In “Theorising narratives of exile and belonging: the importance of biography and ethno-mimesis in understanding asylum” the authors discuss the use of biographical materials in PAR as a means to talk back against othering stereotypes and myths created of refugees by the dominant knowledge/power axis. Through critical theory building the article contributes to cultural politics aiming towards a vision of social justice.

John Given’s article “Narrating the digital turn: data deluge, technomethodology, and other likely tales” gives an indication of the dramatic transformative possibilities that digital technologies will have in the social sciences and in particular in studying “biographical narratives”. Given argues that the development of digital technologies further enhances the interdisciplinary nature of the study of biographical narrative and helps crossing the border between quantitative and qualitative approaches. The article discusses the wide range of theoretical and methodological developments that all phases of the research process may go through – departing from what usually constitutes data, methods of analysis and ways of dissemination.

Kip Jones investigates the aesthetic basis for a new performative social science and the implications of this search for “biographic narrative” research. In his article “A Biographic researcher in pursuit of an aesthetic: The use of arts-based (re)presentations in ‘performative’ dissemination of life stories” he draws upon the influential work of Bourriaud on “relational aesthetics” – which is based on the notion of “relational art” as encompassing social interaction within social settings. Using an

example of biographic narrative interviewing from his own work he shows the inter-subjectivity of such interaction and seeks to show how Art as a social exchange can inform the construction, representation and dissemination of biographical narrative stories.

References

- Mills, C. Wright (1970) *The Sociological Imagination*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Stanley, Liz and David Morgan (1993) "Editorial, Special Issue: Biography and Autobiography in Sociology." *Sociology* 27 (1): 1-4.
- Plummer, Ken (2001) *Documents of Life 2. An Invitation to A Critical Humanism*. 2nd edition. London: Sage.
- Roberts, Brian (2002) *Biographical Research*. Buckingham: OU.

Citation

- Roberts, Brian and Riitta Kyllonen (2006) "Editorial Introduction: Special Issue – 'Biographical Sociology'." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. II Issue 1. Retrieved Month, Year
(http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)

Authors

Brian Roberts (PhD) is Visiting Professor in Border Studies at the University of Glamorgan, UK. He is Vice-President, Biography and Society RC38, ISA and a Board Member, Biographical Perspectives on European Societies RN, ESA and on the editorial boards of *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *Auto/Biography* and *Family and Community History* journals. His publications include *Policing the Crisis* (1978) (Macmillan) (with S. Hall et al.); *Biographical Research*, (2002) (OU); *Micro-Social Theory* (2006, Palgrave, in press); and *The Researcher's Experience of Research* (2006/7, Sage, forthcoming). His research interests include: narrative and life history; time and memory; and communal studies. He is currently writing a book on communal change in a former mining valley in S. Wales, and developing projects on: 'Composing Sexual Stories' and 'Migration and new identities in S. Wales'. He has been a visiting researcher/lecturer in Denmark, Sweden and Poland.
Contact: broberts@glam.ac.uk

Riitta Kyllönen is Researcher at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her research interests include methodological and epistemological issues in qualitative research, and feminist research. She has worked in several international projects on the welfare state, family and the labour market. Among her articles in English are, 'It's in the way you use it': Biography as a tool in professional social work, in Chamberlayne, Prue and Joanna Bornat and Ursula Apitzsch (eds.) (2004) *Biographical Methods and Professional Practice*, (The Policy Press) and 'Interpreting the needs of lone mothers', *European Journal of Social Work* (1999). Currently she is working on a comparative project on elderly care 'Squaring the Care Circle' in Finland and Italy (funded by the Academy of Finland, SA1211195). She is co-authoring a book on care and writing articles on transnational care, and issues of fieldwork in a comparative perspective. She has been as a (visiting) researcher in several Italian Universities, and in the Mannheim Centrum of European Social Research (MZES), Germany.
Contact: riitta.kyllonen@uta.fi