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## ***The Turn to a Narrative Knowing of Persons: One Method Explored***

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The paper discusses the shift to narrative studies and the growth of biographical research in the social sciences as a way of knowing persons. Dangers inherent in false assumptions of knowledge of interviewing and semi-structured probes are noted. The author's experience with the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method is discussed, using examples from his research on identity and the informal care role to explain the method.

The method uses a minimalist-passive interviewing technique and reflecting teams for analyses of data. Microanalysis of the 'lived life' and thematic field analysis of the 'told story' are described. The use of small sample frames to generate meaningful case studies is defended. The interview technique is expanded upon, paying attention to the concept of Gestalt. The post-interview reflective process is described, followed by a case being made for analytic induction as both the foundation of Grounded Theory and an alternative to it. The use of reflective teams is expanded upon *vis à vis* the author's research. Unique approaches to the data analysis, which developed in the author's use of the method, are argued as adding flexibility to the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method. The paper concludes with a discussion of concepts of truth and veracity in storytelling and the researcher's reconstructive process in piecing together images of a whole through the imaginative subjective dramas of everyday lives.

**Keywords:** Interviewing, Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method, Informal Care, Gestalt, Analytic induction, Sample size, Reflective teams

### **Introduction**

Denzin has recently proclaimed that the turn to narrative in the social sciences has been taken (Denzin 2001: 23), a *fait accompli*. One democratising practise within this paradigm shift is a renewed interest in biography as a method of knowing persons. He points out, "No longer does the writer-as-interviewer hide behind the question-answer format, the apparatuses of the interview machine" (30). The interviewer, finally, has come into the light as willing participant in a dialogical process. Crucially, narrative biography or 'story-telling' offers up the opportunity for democratising the experience of teller and listener (or performer and audience) by sharing the goal of participating in an experience which reveals shared "same-ness" (Porter cited in Denzin: 25). This has been expressed elsewhere as the concept of the "*habitus* –our second nature, the mass of conventions, beliefs and attitudes which each member of a society shares with every other member" (Scheff, 1997: 219). The paradox thus develops that by expressing individual differences, we uncover common ground.

Biographical methods used to promote participatory and inclusive approaches to health research have been hailed as ground-breaking, particularly in documenting hidden histories and dialogue with disparate communities (Rickard 2001: 2). "The rising popularity of biographical research tools may well lie in their aptness for exploring subjective and cultural formations, and tracing interconnections between the personal and the social" (Chamberlayne & King 2000: 9). In addition, the use of a biographical approach to understanding human concerns makes sense in that its methodology transcends the barriers of self/society as well as those of past/present/future. These include "barriers between the individual self and the collective society as well as those compartmentalising

the past, present and future" (Miller 2000: xiii). In addition, the grounding of narrative studies in theoretical and philosophical principles has persisted in flourishing since the early 90s (Jones 2001a: 1).

A danger lies, however, in the assumption that 'business as usual' approaches to qualitative enquiries need simply tack on the word 'narrative' to titles of papers, resulting in them becoming narrative enquiries. The gold standard of 'semi-structured probes,' used in much of social science interview research in the past several decades, is too often based upon the predetermined assumptions built into the researcher's questions (see Priest 2001: 245), one of Denzin's "apparatuses of the interview machine." The turn to narrative enquiry shifts the very presence of the researcher from 'knowledge-privileged investigator' to a reflective position of passive participant/audience member in the storytelling process. The interviewer as writer/storyteller then emerges later in the process through her/his retelling of the story as a weaver of tales, a collage-maker or a narrator of the narrations.

The interview/case-study approach selected for the author's Ph.D. research, *Narratives of Identity and the Informal Care Role* (Jones 2001b), was based on training in a method of biographical-narrative interviewing and analysis developed by Chamberlayne and Wengraf, Centre for Biography in Social Policy, University of East London. The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (Chamberlayne et al 2000; Wengraf 2001) is, in turn, built upon a method developed in Germany in the early 90s by Rosenthal and others and evolving from Shuetze's 1976 method of story and text analysis and Oevermann's 1980 objective hermeneutical case reconstruction (Rosenthal & Bar-On 1992: 109). This dynamic and interpretive method, with its emphasis on action and latent meaning, distinguishes it within the broad and rich range of life history, oral history and narrative approaches (Chamberlayne & King 2000: 17). "This objective hermeneutic method proceeds on a step-by-step basis, with each supposition or proto-hypothesis being immediately evaluated against interview transcript material. 'Hermeneutic' since the researcher is aware that any material being produced by the interviewee has been generated with regard to both the interviewee's subjective perception of his/her situation and history and the interviewee's perception of the research and the relationship between the two of them" (Miller 2000: 131).

The author chose this narrative interview method because it incorporated the possibility of working with two key concepts: 1. That stories are unique and individually constructed wholes, and 2. That what interviewees have to say about their lives and self-concepts are much more illuminating than any specific research assumptions or questions could be. For example, this researcher may have had preconceived ideas or questions about what an interviewee's life as a carer might be. The carer her/himself may, on the other hand, have seen the constructed whole of her/his life story as one as a parent, daughter, son and so forth, not just the story of her/his carer role. The carer role, in fact, may well have been one constructed or nested within another more central role or one left undefined as separate from it at all.

### **Overview of the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method**

The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method interview technique uses a single, initial narrative-inducing question ("minimalist-passive," [Wengraf 2000: 10]), for example, '*Tell me the story of your life,*' to illicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. "This apparently simple request has led to a quiet revolution in social science practice. For it even to be seen as a legitimate query required a shift in paradigmatic viewpoints about the nature of the social scientific enterprise" (Miller 2000: 1). The Gestalt of the participant's story using a minimal passive interview technique is maintained by a method of non-interruption. "Eliciting open-ended narratives provides a window on the very structure of individuals' representations . . . stories allow researchers to see the Gestalt—the interrelations of structural linkages that individuals perceive among positive and negative attributes and experiences (Murray & Holmes 1994: 660). This very shift encompasses a willingness on the part of the researcher to cede 'control' of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. This claim not to probe, guide or ask questions and its potential for revealing the flux and contradictions of everyday subjective reality, is in itself a theoretical orientation closely allied to symbolic interactionism (Plummer 1983: 123).

In the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method, the first part of the interview is followed by a second sub-session, based upon the Gestalt of the first and reflecting the ordering of themes presented by the interviewee in the initial interview. Gestalt is central to the theoretical principles of the method; for example, the Gestalt of the participant's story is maintained by this method of non-interruption. Gestalt has been defined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) as "a whole which is more than the sum of its parts, an order or hidden agenda informing each person's life" (2000: 34) Gestalt represents the constructed shape of a story, through theme, motif and/or various agendas--hidden or otherwise. After the second interview sub-session, additional material can then be utilised to build the case, including the possibility of a follow-up third session with more focused probes as well as the collection and discussion of ancillary materials such as diaries, writings, photographs, and so forth.

Microanalysis of the narrative of the reconstructed life follows the interview stage, using a reflective team approach to data analysis. The '*lived life*,' or chronological chain of events as narrated, is analysed sequentially and separately. The '*told story*,' or thematic ordering of the narration, is then analysed using thematic field analysis, involving reconstructing the participants' system of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives and their classification of experiences into thematic fields (Rosenthal 1993: 61). "The *thematic field* is defined as the sum of events or situations presented in connection with the themes that form the background or horizon against which the theme stands out as the central focus" (1993: 64). The thematic field is holistic, but organised at the same time. Objectivity is maintained by keeping each stage of the analysis discrete as well as involving different teams of researchers in a team process of hypothesising and developing the themes (Millar 1998: 3).

"Originally, life *story* referred to the account given by an individual about his or her life. When this personal account was backed up by additional external sources . . . the validated life story was called a life *history*. This concern with triangulation – the validation of narrated life stories through information from additional, preferably quantified, sources has not remained central to most current biographical practice. Nowadays, . . . 'life history' refers to a series of substantive events arranged in chronological order . . . 'Life story' still refers to the account given by an individual, only with emphasis upon the ordering into themes or topics that the individual chooses to adopt or omit as s/he tells the story" (Miller 2000: 19).

"Life story and life history always come together. They are continuously dialectically linked and produce each other; this is the reason why we must reconstruct both levels no matter whether our main target is the life history or the life story" (Rosenthal 1993: 61). The biographical details and themes are then tested against in-depth analysis of the text, examining hesitancy, repetition, contradictions and pauses. Through hypothesising how the lived life informs the told story, the case history is then finally constructed from the two separate threads of the '*lived life*' and the '*told story*.' A case structure is then formulated that validates more than one event based upon the actions of the interviewee.

### **Sample size**

Because the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method requires extensive interviews with follow-up sessions as well as intricate and labour-intensive analytical procedures, sample frames typically remain small. Often a sample size is projected initially, but remains fluid throughout the research process (Benner 1994: 107). Factors effecting the ultimate number of cases presented include the size of the text that was generated and the number of colleagues and their time available to analyse the text. Richness of data and thorough and meaningful analysis involving the assemblage of these colleagues into reflecting teams to explore and hypothesise themes often necessitate the limiting of the number of interviews to be analysed in full. Efforts can be made, nonetheless, to insure that the initial selection of subjects for interview include a diverse range of participants with varying demographic and family relationship backgrounds and so forth (Chamberlayne & King 2000: 16-17). In the author's research seven informal carers from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, ages and familial roles were interviewed, for example. What may have been lost in not using a method with the potential for larger numbers of subjects, producing large data sets, was more than compensated for by the method's capacity for deep and

meaningful case studies. These case studies are rich with potential for the discovery of new material and room to generate further hypotheses, effect change in social policy and ultimately validate and illuminate participants' lives.

### **Interviewing**

The interview procedure in the author's research, based upon the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method, began with the single probe,

***I would like you to tell me the story of your life. Take as much time as you would like. I am not going to interrupt you, but I will be taking notes. When you are finished, we will take a break for about 15-20 minutes. When we resume, I will be asking you a few more details based upon my notes of what you have told me.***

Except for confirming utterances, eye contact, body language and so forth, the interviewer made no further interjections. If a participant was 'stuck' and did not know what to say or how to go on, phrases like "Take your time" were used to reassure the participant, but no new questions were posed. This attentive listening "draws the stories out of their hide-away . . . expectant listening seems to be an indigenous part of all stories or narratives" (Wyatt in Sarbin 1986: 200). Crucially, the Gestalt of the participant's story was maintained by this method of non-interruption. By balancing and linking these two central concepts of minimalist-passive interviewing (maintenance of the Gestalt of the storyteller and drawing him/her out through expectant listening) a revolution in interview technique is accomplished.

In the author's research, most initial interview sessions lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour. Usually the session was ended by the participant stating, "That's about it" or "Well, that's my story." In no case was the session ended by the interviewer, even in cases when the participant was searching for something to say. Silences were maintained without interjection by the interviewer, unless the participant asked for help. In those instances phrases like, "Well, tell me more about your life" and so forth were used to help the participant. "If we allow respondents to continue in their own way until they indicate they have finished their answer, we are likely to find stories; if we cut them off, . . . if we do not appear to be listening to their stories . . . then we are unlikely to find stories" (Mishler in Sarbin 1986: 235).

In the author's interviews, participants were asked to fill out a single sided questionnaire of background information during the interval. At this time, the interviewer read through the notes taken in session one and looked for developing themes and phrases or areas of story that could be expanded upon. After the break, the participant reattached the microphone and the second part of the session began. The themes and stories to be elaborated upon were presented in the same order, using the same words that the participant had used in subsession one, and, therefore, maintaining the Gestalt of the narrative established in the earlier session. "The question is strictly for more story, designed to elicit more narration about the themes and topics initially raised" (Wengraf 2000: 19). Typically, the second part of the interview lasted a half-hour to forty-five minutes. The session ended with the interviewer asking if there were anything that the participant would like to add or felt that s/he had missed. If not, the interviewer then suggested a follow up telephone call for any further input from the participant and to have an opportunity to correct any biographical details such as names, dates, and so forth. The participant was then thanked and the session ended. At a later date, a thank you letter was sent to the participant and the organised follow-up phone call was made.

In one of the author's early cases, a follow-up interview session was conducted to test the method to its widest extent, but also to expand and enrich the material from the earlier two sessions. In certain circumstances, when important underdeveloped themes of a particular interview suggested productive follow-up questions, a third interview session is necessitated. "Although the three subsessions are analytically distinct from the point of view of the researcher-interviewer, they do not necessarily mean that the interviewee will experience all or only three

apparently different interviews. Typically, subsession 1 and 2 blend together into a 'first interview' and subsession 3 is a 'second interview'" (Wengraf 2001: 204). At this particular interview of the author, it was possible to probe for more specific information that took into account the 'read' of the initial sessions and the interviewer's impressions of the lived life and told story. Because this was the first time that the interviewer's responses to the manifested data formed questions, the Gestalt of the told story had not been interrupted or broken. It was at this time and place that, finally, the interviewer directly responded to the participant's story with enquiries based on the researcher's reflections and early interpretations. The questions, nonetheless, were based upon dialogue from the story as presented in the original sessions, although not necessarily in the same order. Themes were drawn together and presented as probes, encouraging the participant to relate to the possible connections indicated by the interviewer's questions—based upon early interpretations of several possible themes. In this singular case, the participant was asked to bring photos, documents, and so forth to the third session for discussion, exploration and elaboration of the life story. Such ancillary materials "acquired outside the boundary of the interview but still within the boundaries of the study" (Mishler in Sarbin 1986: 247) were crucial in building this case. Photographs were particularly helpful in unearthing periods or stories in the participant's past that had been difficult to describe during the first sessions.

### **Post interview processes**

In the author's research, session debriefing notes were compiled by the interviewer as soon after each session as possible in order to get down on paper the initial feelings, responses, concerns and so forth raised by the interview. Next, the researcher listened to the recorded interview and took notes from the 'second hearing,' ideally at least a week or two later. When the researcher typed the word-for-word transcript, notes were also made. These initial debriefings were necessary and central to understanding the interview process. These free associating exercises provide an opportunity to express the interviewer's experience and ideas about the session, including obstructions (Wengraf 2000: 39). The accumulated notes became crucial documents for later reflection by the researcher and supported the use of relational metaphors in understanding "the problem," the actions taken (or not) and the relationships "among the interlocutors themselves" (Gergen 1999: 8).

Next, the biographical data chronology of the life story was compiled. It was here that a biography, (names, dates, events, and so forth) was constructed in chronological order and in a brief, telegraphic format. Finally, the text structure sequentialisation or a diagram "showing the changing structure of the text, particularly that of the story told in the initial narration" (Wengraf 2001: 236) of the story was constructed. This is a textural structure created freely by the interviewee and reflects the gestalt of the told story. It includes but is not limited to changes in speaker, topic change and/or "text sort" change, or change in the way a given topic is being treated by the speaker through Description, Argumentation, Report, Narrative or Evaluation (Wengraf 2001: 241).

An exploratory full pilot interview (a three-part interview over two days) was conducted by the author during and immediately following the period of the East London training. Because of the complicated spousal medical history presented by this initial participant, questions arose concerning her husband's medical story. It was decided to set up a 'case study' session based upon the participant's narrative description of her husband's illness history. Two medical doctors in a General Practise Research Group at the University were asked to participate in a pilot analysis reflecting team session. The session was conducted in order to familiarise the researcher with the process, test the method's applicability to the data at hand and begin to solve the health history puzzle of the interviewee's husband. Initial reservations about the flexibility of the medical doctors to participate in a pointedly qualitative process were dissipated by their immediate grasp of the analytical process and method's concept. Hunter (in Mishler 1995) reminded us that medicine is filled with stories and is, in fact, dependent on narrative, is essentially case-based knowledge and practice and that clinical judgement is "fundamentally interpretative" (1995: 112-113). An hour-long session based upon eight to ten lines of transcript provided rich hypothesising as well as generating materials for further analyses. "Once an interpretation of a text is developed, one may engage in a comparison of that interpretation with any other level of theoretical or cultural discourse offering critical reflection

and comparison with the interpretive commentary” (Benner 1994: xviii). In analytic induction, no analysis is considered final.

### **Data Analysis**

Analytic induction, “from which Glaser and Strauss’s work on grounded theory derives” (Chalip in White et al 1998: 3), and, therefore, also the basis of the data analysis method used in the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method, was first described by the sociologist Florian Znaniecki in 1934 (Ratcliff 2000: 1; Robinson 1951: 812). In the late teens of the last century, Znaniecki developed the research-technique known as the analysis of human documents (letters, memoirs, life histories and so forth) with the seminal work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958; [originally published 1918-1920]). This approach to life and lived experience was later defined as the autobiographical method in sociology and located in the theory of symbolic interactionism (Plummer 1983: 40). Znaniecki was a member of faculty at the University of Chicago at the time when its Department of Sociology –the first of its kind in the U.S.—was known as ‘the Chicago School.’ The life history method was central to this school (Miller 2000: 4) and “it was the first American university to establish an original collective school of thought: pragmatism” (Plummer 1983: 51). Znaniecki’s approach stimulated debate within both sociology and psychology over the next several decades. For example, the psychologist, Allport advocated, more strongly than anybody else, for the use of idiographic case study method in psychology. He proposed that its use overcame the pursuit of general laws about traits abstracted from individuals, which had ignored the unique constellation of traits in one individual (1983: 48).

Znaniecki held that analytic induction is the true method of the physical and biological sciences, and that it ought to be the method of the social sciences too (Znaniecki cited in Robinson 1951: 812). Inductive rather than deductive reasoning is involved, allowing for modification of concepts and relationships between concepts. The process occurs throughout the action of doing research with the goal of most accurately representing the reality of the situation. No analysis is considered final, since reality is constantly changing. The emphasis in analytic induction is on the whole, even though elements and the relationships between elements are analysed. A specific case need not necessarily be ‘average’ or representative of the general phenomena studied. It is crucial, nonetheless, that a case has essential characteristics and that it function as a pattern by which future cases can be defined (1951: 1). In 1950, Cressey summarised Znaniecki’s analytic induction as six steps:

1. A phenomenon is defined in a tentative manner.
2. A hypothesis is developed about it.
3. A single instance is considered to determine if the hypothesis is confirmed.
- 4.** If the hypothesis fails to be confirmed, either the phenomenon is redefined or the hypothesis is revised to include the instance examined.
5. Additional cases are examined and, if the new hypothesis is repeatedly confirmed, some degree of certainty about the hypothesis results.
6. Each negative case requires that the hypothesis be reformulated until there are no exceptions. (Cressey cited in Ratcliff 2000: 1)

The Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method is based, in part, on grounded theory (Chamberlayne & Rustin 1999: 25). Analytic induction, however, contrasts to the now more widely used and invoked grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) in several ways. Analytic induction tests as well as generates theory and all data available must be used to test hypotheses (Ratcliff 2000: 2). Additionally, “in interpretive (hermeneutic) research, unlike in grounded theory, the goal is to discover meaning and to achieve understanding” (Benner 1994: 10). On the other hand, Grounded Theorists themselves may very well lay claim to goals of discovering meaning and achieving understanding as well!

Inductive data analysis, as an alternative to grounded theory’s “constant comparison method” (Thomas in White et al 1998: 1) “is typically qualitative; it makes use of comparisons (typically of cases); it often makes use of techniques which share some affinity with phenomenology and hermeneutics” (Chalip in White et al 1998: 3). By

using analytical induction within a phenomenological or hermeneutic approach, a philosophical statement is made about the underpinnings of the analysis (White in White et al 1998: 5). It is, nonetheless, “perfectly feasible to interpret data obtained via particular methods . . . that are dissimilar from those who advocate (or even invented) those methods” (Chalip in White et al 1998: 6). In addition, Becker (1958) has shown that several ways of doing analysis in a study can be “triangulated” and this data used to speculate about what might be (1958: 654).

Analogous to Znaniecki’s and Robinson’s analytic induction, as well as the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method methodology, is Mehan’s (cited in Ratcliff 2000: 2) “constitutive ethnography,” incorporating aspects of analytic induction. “The process of analysis is initiated with analysis of a small data set from which a tentative hypothetical framework is generated. Comparisons are made with additional forthcoming data resulting in changes in the framework until a group of ‘recursive rules’ are developed that comprehensively describe the phenomenon” (2000: 2).

### **Reflecting teams**

Using a ‘reflecting team’ approach to data analysis facilitates the introduction of multiple voices, unsettling and creating a mix of meaning and encouraging communication and collective means of deliberation (Gergen 2000: 4). In the author’s research a rigorous use of reflecting teams was put in place in order to facilitate the group analytical process and other researchers known to the primary researcher were solicited to participate in analytical sessions. The process began by recruiting colleagues (two, three or more per team) from varying backgrounds (professionally as well as demographically) to be immersed in the transcript, at times ‘line by line’ and hypothesise at each new revelation of dialogic material. What was sought in using this procedure was an opening up of the possibilities in interpretation, rather than relying solely upon the primary researcher’s interpretation of the interview. The abilities required of group participants were openness and creativity/imagination rather than knowledge of specific research methods. In fact, diversity of approach to the material was solicited and encouraged. In this way, each participant brought his or her own social context or ‘lived life’ to the process and, therefore, contributed uniquely to the ways of seeing the lives of others.

Researchers were recruited through the email lists of a Research Centre and others from the Faculty of the University. Dates and times for sessions were established and co-ordinated with the schedules of interested respondents. Sessions lasted approximately three hours and were held at a campus location. The sessions took place over one year. Thirteen reflecting team meetings were held and four of the seven interviewee’s transcripts were analysed. Session teams were comprised of colleagues from a pool of 19 people. The lived life and told story were analysed in separate sessions, using different reflecting teams, to facilitate later comparing and contrasting of the lived life and told story.

The sessions began with the typical introductions of participants whose details were noted on a flip chart. Most teams were comprised of nurses, researchers, lecturers, and so forth. Next, the panel members were asked to tell something about themselves that one might not expect from the earlier professional descriptions offered. These were also written on the flip chart. Participants were then asked to bring to the analysis session that ‘other’ person whom they had just described. Through this introductory exercise, they were encouraged to engage in a dialogue with the text of the life of another and bring to that dialogue more than just their professional selves. Some examples of the team participants descriptions of their past experiences included the following: time spent as a surveyor, working as a male fashion model, immigrating from Zimbabwe, having spent childhood as an evangelical missionary, having formerly been a fine artist, having been a failure at “A” levels, being raised as a Romany gypsy and membership in a hippie commune. Some of the team members’ past experiences were quite surprising too, considering their present activities and occupations. Participants’ ages included those in their 20s, 30, 40s and 50s to one nearing 70 years; gender was equally represented in most sessions. Of the pool of 19, four participants were non-white.

An important and interesting lesson was learned from the reflective team sessions. When time ran out and the end of the transcript was not reached, participants seemed somewhat dissatisfied. It became clear that team members needed to know the whole story—have a beginning, middle and end—as in any good story. Another observation was that team members, once immersed in the process, brought their personalities to the fore. For example, one member, who has a great sense of humour, often used humour or casual remarks when going through the exercise of hypothesising and analysing the transcript sentence by sentence. These seemingly flip remarks often held a great deal of truth, unknown to the panel at that particular stage of data analysis. In addition, the oldest panel member seemed to impart a special wisdom to the process from the strength of his life experience, something others did not have in such abundance. It was also observed that some members with nursing backgrounds initially had difficulty projecting possible outcomes from early databits in the lived life or told story. When questioned about this informally, they replied that their training made it difficult for them to make “value judgements” about the lives of others. “The value of the panel of analysts and of peer review lies in part in the capacity of different researchers to have anxieties that are different from those of each other and from that of the interviewee” (Wengraf in Chamberlayne et al 2000: 144). After some time working with the method, however, those with nursing backgrounds were able to find their own way of hypothesising along with the others.

In the process of using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method, individual and unique approaches to data analyses emerged. It became clear to the researcher that certain aspects of the method often got in the way of the data’s potential to inform and illuminate; pragmatic considerations of working within a team setting produced a need to be flexible. In fact, the method’s claim that it is an “advance on the intuitive approach of much qualitative research in Britain” (Chamberlayne & King 2000: 10) raised further questions: in asking reflecting team members to speculate about a life story, was not the potential of intuition ultimately a great advantage to this very process? (See Scheff 1997: 33-36)

The rigidity of the text structure sequentialisation tool (Wengraf 2001: 239-43) became difficult and unwieldy in producing data that was workable for the reflecting teams within the time allotted for analyses. The method seemed to require an adherence to consistencies within the told narrative, rather than uncovering links based on spontaneous association (Hollway & Jefferson 2000: 152). A concentration on the text structure appeared to restrict the reflecting teams’ possibilities of multiple, intuitive responses to the data. In addition, the configuration of the text structure sequentialisation categories seemed to be changing and becoming more complex with each new publication by its authors (Chamberlayne et al 2000; Chamberlayne & King 2000; Wengraf 2000; Wengraf 2001). A decision was made, therefore, to reduce strict adherence to this particular process of the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method and concentrate on the more instinctive and creative possibilities of the data analysis interface through selection of meaningful text upon which hypotheses and associations might be made.

It was decided for pragmatic reasons, therefore, to background the text sequentialisation process and foreground the microanalysis of selected text within the team setting. “Microanalysis aims at analysing the interrelation between past experiences and their presentation in depth, concentrating on small selected pieces of text and a checking previous hypothesis” (Rupp & Jones in Chamberlayne et al 2000: 288). This process of abduction or posing all possible hypotheses after each unit of text and then gradually eliminating them necessitates the limiting of the microanalysis to only small, selected bits of text.

In certain instances in the author’s research, the text chosen for analysis was selected because it did represent shifts in the modes of narration by the interviewee (description, narration, argumentation, and so forth [Wengraf 2001: 239-43]). At other times, however, other text was selected for its ability to telegraph potential themes and their development, emotional states (such as anxiety and defence; see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), and so on. In one case, for example, the interviewee’s use of sighs and/or laughter was microanalysed for meaning and theme development by analysing the dialogue surrounding these physical utterances (see Jones 2001a). Nonetheless, all narrative microanalyses followed the order in which they were expressed by the interviewee.



In addition, the claim has been made that all interpretive work, however sociological, requires a theory of the subject (Hollway & Jefferson 2000: 59). This seemed key to this particular investigation of personality and its commitment to the concept of the *individual within a social context*. This centrality of the individual within a social context was imperative in illuminating the original research question. In the author's research, strict adherence to what in the end was a sociologically developed method seemed counterproductive to this study's social psychological agenda.

### **Conclusions**

What does it mean when we know a person (Jones 2000)? In truth seeking, are we merely comparing and contrasting our own everyday world with the worlds of others? Within the individual's world and his/her tendency of "revealing/concealing", "knowing/not knowing" (Heidegger in Krell 1993), by exploring the terrain, are we simply only portraying the process itself, its dialectical underpinnings – its thesis and antithesis? Or, in fact, do we, in our attempts at some sort of a truth (Verismo) stumble on to a synthesis after all, a moment of revelation that truly is wrenched by the individual in his/her self-knowing and revealed to us?

Asking a person to tell us about his/her life is just a beginning. By doing this, in a less than perfect way, we are at least starting by participating in the story of the person in her/his world, her/his expectations, successes, failures and dreams. The swirl of a remembered past is (re)constructed by just such illusive characteristics. A narration of a life is, after all is said, a story, an illusion. "Any and all stories we might tell *about* ourselves are essentially fictitious; they are vehicles for warding off the flux and meeting our need for order – illusory though it may be to suppose that this order exists anywhere but in our own minds" (Freeman 1997: 379). Veracity, therefore, must remain secondary. What remains primary is that this is how one individual sees him/herself when asked to recount him/herself today (Plummer 1983: 57). "Reflecting on one's life is fundamentally a metaphorical one, giving form to one's previous and present experience" (Freeman 1993: 30).

As much as we try to elevate this metaphor to a discussion of objects, concepts, thoughts, and the like, to a higher plane, perhaps by exploring meaning within meanings of the language used to describe such things, we all still "bump into the furniture" (1993: 13). Perhaps the most any approach to knowing of others can produce in sensing the lives of others—that very 'otherness'—is a fleeting consciousness of what it is like to bump into their furniture, their own 'selves' through the stories that they construct via the illusory imagination of narrative. These are the illusions like the shapes, forms, and monsters that one envisions in passing clouds. They reform back into clouds again, and then pass from view, as we remain always expectant of another to appear. "*It's cloud's illusions I recall.*" The trick is to 'get it down'—this illusion, this configuration of momentary meaningfulness—before it escapes from memory. Such it is in illusion, so too in life stories.

"The project at hand is therefore ultimately a reconstructive one; it is a project of exploring lives in their various modes of integration and dis-integration, formation and de-formation, and, on the basis of what is observed, piecing together images of the whole" (Freeman 1997: 395). This whole becomes the imaginative subjective drama of an everyday life: the Verismo of the quotidian. In listening to stories—like an anticipating audience ushered into the hush of a darkened theatre—disbelief is mutually suspended and the possibility of shared comprehension is embraced.

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