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## PERSPECTIVES IN LEARNING

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### Negotiating a Labyrinth: Uncovering Meaning Through Biography

*By F. Thornton-Reid*

#### Introduction

Biographical method is one of "several intellectual disciplines that make use of life writing" (Smith, 1994, p. 286). However, biographies are probably better described as an interdisciplinary methodology that incorporates several approaches to qualitative research including but not limited to life history, narrative analysis, case study, historical social science, grounded theory and ethnography (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Riessman, 1993; Atkinson, 1998). In laymen's terms, a biography can be understood as the written history of a person's life. Thus the life history or narrative story of a person is a key biographical concept.

Controversy has long surrounded life history. Runyan (1982a) stated that the terminology has subjected the method to criticism. The controversy is fueled and further complicated by the interchangeable use of the terminology related to biography. Smith (1994) delineated no less than ten (10) label variations of life writing including "portrayals, profiles, memoirs, life stories, life histories, case studies, autobiographies, journals and diaries." Like Runyan (1982b), I believe the lack of specific language creates ambiguity as to whether the researcher has undertaken a method of collecting data or whether the terminology expresses the matter being investigated. For example, Bodgen and Bilken (1998) do not list biography or personal narratives as a form of qualitative research design. Instead, they consider life histories a form of case study while autobiographies are listed as a personal source document from which the researcher can gather information and skeptically make inferences.

The diversity of terms is not the only complication in biographical methodology. Frequently, there is "diversity of accounts" for one individual life (Runyan, 1982c, p. 21). Over the years, the lives of heroes, heroines, famous and infamous individuals of various cultures have been chronicled. Runyan explored diversity of accounts in the lives of Jesus, Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln. His review demonstrated that inadequate scholarship affected the account of a life; however, an acceptable variation in the account of a life results from varying perspectives life (Runyan, 1982c). Critics of biography capitalize on the variant perspectives derived from the same data.

Personally, I do not view different perspectives on the same life as a weakness of biographical method. Determining a particular writer's slant or perspective while reading a biography is an understandable and foreseeable dynamic. Ascertaining the philosophic perspective informs me about the writer. I access information about the personal life of the subject, and gain insight regarding the meaning of that life to the biographer.

Clifford (in Smith, 1994) reported on how biographies take various forms and shapes along a continuum from strongly factual to highly fictionalized. The purpose of the writer guides the conceptionalization of the biography along the aforementioned continuum. As a scholarly endeavor, I believe that a biography should be written as an analytical, interpretative narrative of the life. It seems to me the core element of biography is the attempt to understand a particular person. If the researcher is attempting "to define the growth of a person in a cultural milieu and to make theoretical sense of it," the biography must be valued as a scientific tool (Dollard, 1935, p.3).

Undertaking gathering the information and writing about the life of a particular person is an ambitious undertaking. No doubt it is this aspect of the biographical method that creates its greatest challenge; the failure to uncover all of the salient elements of the



life or the potential to disregard or eliminate an important element. The breadth and span of one life can generate numerous data. A biography seems to feed on interviews, artifacts, documents, letters, diaries and library resources such as books and articles. Smith (1994, p. 290) describes it as a "jigsaw puzzle." Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 122) state that "the abundance of data collected in a life history" requires reduction management before analysis. Biographers must carefully study the interwoven strands of a life that expand over periods of time and "find a coherence in what is learned" (Tarsi, personal communication, Fall semester, 2000). However, if you miss or eliminate a vital piece, the "puzzle" is incomplete and the representation of the life inadequate (Smith, 1999, p. 290).

As with other forms of qualitative research the question of validity and reliability plague biography. As the slant of the biography is the choice of the researcher, it seems easier to "fall into the trap" of biased selection. For example I believe that black male students are unfairly referred to administrators for disciplinary action. In presenting my case, should I select an individual for study shares my bias, rather than utilizing the analysis of data to distinguish themes, I could compromised the reliability of the data. The issues of validity and reliability can be addressed through the triangulation of data, accuracy of reporting and reflectivity. (Bogdin & Bilken, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Smith, 1994).

An example of the enormity of a biographical undertaking can be observed in what I term a historical biography, entitled *Celia, A Slave*. Although there were chronological aspects to the account, McLaurin (1991) searched numerous archival documents to reconstruct the contextual setting for Celia's life story. To fully prepare the reader to appreciate the events in Celia's life, McLaurin also reconstructed the lives of individuals who impacted her life. The simple biography of a woman with seemingly little significance took on the role of major importance as McLaurin explored the social structure of the community and the country during the time Celia lived. Detailed scholarship that adequately explores events and other individuals surrounding the person's life goes a long way toward communicating a true sense of the person.

The story of Celia illustrates the strengths of a biography. The author selected Celia's trial for the murder of her owner and the conditions of her life leading up to the event as the focus of the study. In reading the events of her life, there were times I felt her experiences. I could envision her cabin and dilemma of survival. McLaurin (1991) painstakingly depicted the era of history and the perspectives of various social groups. It was if I was transported to the era just prior to the Civil War. Not only could I feel Celia's stress and torment, but also I could sense motivations and dilemmas faced by others involved in Celia's life. Jones (in Marshall & Rossman, 1999) delineated the following five (5) criteria as important elements of life history:

1. The individual should be viewed as a member of a culture. . .
2. [The life history] should capture the significant role that others play. . .
3. The cultural world under study should be described and analyzed. . .
4. [The life history] should focus on the experience of an individual over time. .
5. the cultural world under study should be continuously related to the individual's unfolding life story. (p. 122-123)

The biography of Celia exemplifies all the aforementioned criteria. The power of her story lies in the author's ability to capture the significance of others in her life and to show in her life, in context, over time, in the culture in which she lived.

Celia's biography convinces that biographic methods are not just utilized for historical perspective. Various disciplines including literature, social science, education as well as feminist and minority perspectives utilize biography (Smith, 1994). The process serves many functions. This is a particular strength of biography. Within the life story, the social aspects of culture can be affirmed, validated and supported. Aspects of health-related issues and intergenerational interaction can be gleaned from biographical study (Atkinson, 1998). The biographer can enable understanding of various complex issues in



rms of an individual life. McLaurin (1991), for example, brought to life the aspects of gender and race that continue to challenge our present day society.

The "art or craft of biography" requires certain questions to be raised to generate an understanding of the individual life (Runyan a, 1982). Biographical narrative as delineated has an interrelated structure consisting of elements such as specific description, comparative analysis, interpretations, casual analysis, judgments and assessments of historical events. These aspects are woven into a story of manageable size with thematic order. Even with its strengths and weaknesses, biography provides the opportunity to incorporate and identify the sense of meaning to intricate personal relationships, cultural relationships, experiences, aspirations and apprehensions embedded in the "observed" world (Tarsi, personal communication, Fall semester 2000)

On logistical levels, completion of a biography involved undertaking a life history, a case study, a historical study, an ethnographic study, personal narrative analysis and in-depth interviewing. The process can seem overwhelming and management of the data cumbersome if not well planned and organized. (Glesne, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 1996) However, troublesome as they may seem, biographies deserve our respect for the richness of life they portray.

Biographical method is a viable, dynamic research method that results in the reporting of someone else's life. From this literary exploration, we may gain a rich and contextual meaning about an issue, an event, or an era. All this may be communicated to the reader through a biography. The great challenge of biography lies in the selection of which approaches to use with which subject. The overwhelming question a biographer must ask herself is; have I got it right? To truly do justice to reporting someone else's life is a vast undertaking.

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