2
Biographical Methods

An Introductory History

… we are concerned with understanding the three components harboured in the word [auto/ biography]: autos (what do we mean by the self?), bios (what do we mean by the life?) and graphe (what do we presume in the act of writing?). Finding answers to such questions is not easy and they have been the basis of philosophical reflections for centuries. Yet they are returned to over and over again in the musings over telling a life. (Ken Plummer, 2001: 86)

Overview

In this chapter:

- We see how the origins of biographical methods can be traced back to oral traditions and the use of oral history.
- We examine the central place of the Chicago School of sociology in the history of biographical approaches.
- We look at how biographical methods have been greatly influenced by feminism, and to an extent critical theory and post-structuralism.
- We consider how psychology, in its mainstream guises, has often been unsympathetic to biographical and narrative methods. Yet there has been a subsidiary strand that has adopted a more sympathetic view.
- We note that the popularity of biographical methods has ebbed and flowed and that, at the present time, there is flow once again.

Introduction

In this chapter we locate the development of biographical methods in an historical context by tracing their roots back to the oral tradition and oral history. Oral history has made a significant contribution to the field, reaching back to accounts of the French Revolution. Likewise, the Polish tradition and the Chicago School of sociology, which emerged after the First World War, have been important influences. We examine the significant contribution of feminism and consider the development, sometimes uneven, of biographical research in specific disciplines, particularly sociology, psychology and education. Undertaking a biography of biographical methods is useful in painting a backcloth to contemporary debates and methodological issues. Questions about the nature of research, the meaning of a life, and the problems of representing lives, as Plummer (2001) states, have been around for centuries.

The biographical turn

The present popularity of biographical methods in social research – the biographical or subjectivist turn (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; see also Bertaux, 1981a; Rosenthal, 1995) – denotes, as mentioned in the first chapter, a reaction against forms of social enquiry that tended to deny subjectivity in research and to neglect the role of human agency in social life. The current resurgence may also be understood by reference to a late or postmodern culture in which some of the social scripts that shaped people's lives in earlier agrarian or industrial periods have weakened or have been rejected, at least in the 'developed' world. Many women, for instance, because of feminism and profound labour market changes and increased educational opportunities, may strive for lives quite different from their mothers or grandmothers. There is a broader sense that people may want to compose (and/or may be forced to, because of social and economic change) their biographies on different terms, in what the British soci-ologist Anthony Giddens terms 'the reflexive project of the self'. Of course others may find the loosening of intergenerational continuities difficult and there can be nostalgic yearning for past certainties, expressed in the rise of various fundamen-talisms (Frosh, 1991; Giddens, 1991, 1999).

We should emphasise, once more, that not all social researchers have been influ-enced by the subjectivist turn and some are actively hostile to it. Many psycholo-gists, for instance, can work from different assumptions: that subjective accounts are too amorphous and unreliable as evidence, as well as beyond systematic obser-vation and measurement. Their approach to research is often rooted in experimen-tation and observation (in the manner of the natural sciences), and in quantification and statistically validated propositions. They seek to identify the precise impact of particular variables on a specific phenomenon (like group pressures on individual behaviour) using controlled experiments (which can be directly observed and mea-sured) – stripping away, as they see it, extraneous socio-cultural or subjectivist dimensions (Frosh, 1989). Social research can move in varied directions.

Oral traditions and history

Story telling has been an important dimension of human communication in all societies: serving to generate and pass on meaning and guidance in what could be a chaotic, brutish, unpredictable world. Stories were a vehicle by which collective histories, shared values and prescriptions for living were communicated intra- and intergenerationally. Pre-literacy, using the voice to tell a story was the key means of communication. Stories were also represented in earlier centuries through art, including prehistoric cave paintings. The collective history, myths and legends of a people were later written down in epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In the oral tradition of passing down stories across the generations, stories became refined, re-interpreted and reconstructed.

Jan Vansina's (1985) work, *Oral Tradition as History* charts the development of the oral tradition. Vansina defines oral traditions as being, 'all oral testimonies concern-ing the past which are transmitted from one person to another' (1985: x). They serve

as a prime historical source of information. For example, we know the history of native American tribes such as the Sioux and Pueblo Indians largely through the oral tradition; yet for some historians this raises questions of validity and reliability. What credence can be given to the stories people tell, riddled as they could be with self-justification or even illusion as to some idyllic past? Such questions have echoes today among social scientists opposing the turn to subjectivity in research. Notwithstanding, oral history was and is used by historians to tell the history of ordinary people and to explore what life was like for them, on their own terms. Paul Thompson stresses this point, arguing that 'the challenge of oral history lies partly in relation to this essential social purpose of history' (2000: 3):

> Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implications for the social message of history as a whole. (P. Thompson, 2000: 7)

In a similar vein, Raphael Samuel emphasises how:

> Interview and reminiscence will also enable the historian to give an identity and character to people who would otherwise remain mere names on a street directory or parish register and to restore to some of their original importance those who left no written record of their lives. (Samuel, 1982: 142)

Oral history claims an egalitarian purpose in that it can bring to life people's social worlds in ways which much documentary evidence rarely does, other than diaries and personal testimonies (P. Thompson, 2000). As with the biographical interview in social research, the oral history interview can be conceived as an interaction and dialogue – generating what Frisch (1990) calls 'shared authority', lending to it a particular legitimacy and a wider social purpose. Many biographical researchers have inherited this social purpose commitment in their work, using it to question dominant myths or challenge some of the stories told of marginalised peoples by powerful others.

The French Revolution: a case study

The French historian, Jules Michelet, based at the Sorbonne, wrote a history of the French revolution, drawing partly on oral accounts of life at the time. Michelet described his research approach as follows:

> When I say oral tradition, I mean national tradition, which remained generally scattered in the mouths of the people, which everybody said and repeated, peasants, townsfolk, old men, women, even children; which you can hear if you enter of an evening into a village tavern; which you may gather if, finding on the road a passer-by at rest, you begin to converse with him about the rain, the season, then the high price of victuals, then the times of the Emperor, then the times of the revolution. (1847: 530)

The use of the oral tradition is not confined to the world of historians, anthropologists employ similar approaches. Today the oral tradition continues to be of significance in many cultures, and sub-cultures, as the work of Elizabeth Tonkin (1992), an anthropologist, illustrates.

A definition of oral history

Tonkin defines oral narratives as being, 'social actions, situated in particular times and places and directed by individual tellers to specific audiences' (1992: 97). For Tonkin it is a dialectical process between structure and agency so that memory becomes 'a key mediating term between the individual and society' (1992: 98).

Oral history developed out of the oral tradition and oral historians have engaged in lengthy debates about the nature of memory and truth in oral accounts, or the interplay of past and present, as well as about processes of interpretation (emphasising that oral narratives, like written texts, are always and inevitably interpretations of events rather than representing the events themselves) (P. Thompson, 2000). Oral historians have raised fundamental issues that biographical researchers also address. Al Thomson, for instance, in developing a theory of memory within oral history, suggests that experience never ends and is open to constant recreation in the light of the present (Thomson, 1994).

Thomson interviewed a number of Anzac veterans about their private experiences of war, comparing the material to the powerful tribal mythologies of Anzac legend. The interviews led to a recovery of lost, even repressed memories, which could, on occasions, be at odds with dominant public accounts (of, for example, a classless, egalitarian army in comparison to the British). The processes of revising stories could be painful because the public myths served, partly, to legitimise a present way of life (in Veterans' Organisations, for example). Thomson also made use of psychoanalytic ideas on repression to develop his theory of selective memory. An individual may feel too vulnerable to integrate certain experiences within their story at a particular time and survives by denying or repressing them, such as in the case of horrific incidents in war.

Oral historians, such as Luisa Passerini (1990) and Alessandro Portelli (1990) have raised similar questions about the selective nature of memory and story telling. Passerini has focused on the nature and power of myth in people's stories. (Myths can be defined in various ways – historically they were concerned with the nature of the divine or transcendent in human life; in a more psychological vein they may be a product of frustrated desire, or of social alienation, which finds expression in the imaginary, in dreams, fantasy and story telling.) Myths can be a way of dealing with collective alienation or disappointment. Oral histories of British and Italian car workers, for example, have illuminated how myths of the car as a means to equality and affluence or sexual potency can permeate the stories workers tell. Myths may find expression in the perceived failures or frustrations of radical

organisations, like the Red Brigade in Italy, in their stories of small communities against the world or of heroic struggles of revolutionaries in other countries. The myth, in these terms, is a means of handling difficult pasts and uncertain presents. Portelli (1990) recounts some of the myths of the 1940s generation of communists in Italy who, as hope for a new order, post-liberation, faded, became frustrated. As they grew older, history could, in some cases, be reinterpreted in dream-like ways, giving vent to frustration. Narrators might exaggerate their role, as a way of managing disappointment and disillusion. The past may be a painful place of lost hopes and frustration and the stories we tell of it can be shaped by a need for self-justification.

Portelli (2006) is, nonetheless, the author of a powerful defence of oral history, especially in an Italian context. There is, he insists, in the academy and beyond, a range of criticism of history from below: that once the 'floodgates of orality are opened, writing (and rationality along with it) will be swept out as if by a spontaneous uncontrollable mass of fluid, amorphous material' (2006: 33). This echoes the 'fine meaningless, detail' accusations of certain British historians. Portelli, in fact, takes on 'traditional writers of history' and the 'omniscient narrator'. 'They appear to be impartial and detached … oral history changes the writing of history … the narrator is pulled into the narrative … the telling of the story is part of the story being told' (Portelli, 2006: 41). Oral historians deliberately allow more of the people to tell their story, which helps create confrontations of different partialities rather than a transcendental account. This, he insists, is what makes oral history (to which we can add biographical research) interesting and important.

Michael Roper (2003), an oral historian, has used psychoanalytic ideas, alongside insights from feminist research, to argue that researchers need to focus on the present as well as the past: in particular what might be happening, unconsciously, in the relationship between researcher and researched. Knowledge produced by researchers, he insists, is always situational, the product of an interaction. The oral historian is inevitably caught in a transference situation in which the degrees of empathy between people will be shaped by emotional residues from the past, including the past of the researcher. Roper concludes that if 'we seek to do more than explain our subjects' behaviour in terms of economics, social forces or conscious intent – if that is we seek a serious engagement with subjectivity – we have to consider the subject's relationships', including with the researcher (Roper, 2003: 30). Rigid distinctions between past and present, self and other, memory and immediacy, begin to unravel as we think seriously of research as a human encounter.

A strong movement

Oral history became a strong movement in various countries after the Second World War. An Oral History Society was established in the United Kingdom and an Oral History Association in the United States, both of which remain popular, with important international interests, as exemplified in the *Oral History* journal. There are many and diverse localised groups worldwide, involved in school oral history projects, oral history workshops and community education/development. Oral

history offers a grassroots approach to historical research, focusing on the memories of marginalised peoples who might otherwise be forgotten. Oral history methods have been used within community development/education to confront and heal painful past memories. In Germany such an approach has been employed to enable the older generation to come to terms with the Nazi past, while educational and community projects on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust have brought different generations and nationalities, such as Germans and Poles, together to share and interrogate their stories and assumptions (Dausien, 2007).

Oral history and feminism

Oral history has a long tradition in feminism, in making women's lives and experiences known in history. For Gluck 'women's oral history … is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist' (1979: 5). In America, for example, feminist historians have used oral history to explore the experiences of nineteenth-century marginalised groups of women, such as blacks in domestic labour (Tucker, 1988) and native American Indians (Perdue, 1980) or pre-Stonewall lesbians (Kennedy, 2006). Inga Elqvist-Salzman (1993), a Swedish feminist, has used oral history, as have others, to study the professional and personal lives of female teachers.

Women's oral history has become well established in the classroom as a discovery/connective tool. The research terrain is rich, covering the women's movement, at various stages, as well as the histories of 'women bound by race, class, gender and sexual orientation' (Armitage and Gluck, 2006: 77). Yet key feminist oral historians, such as Susan H. Armitage and Sherna Berger Gluck, have begun to ask many more questions about what has been achieved; and about the nature of the research process, which turned out, they argue, to be more complex than initially realised (Armitage and Gluck, 2006). The enthusiasm for recovering women's histories remains but there is also a more analytically sophisticated debate. This surrounds, for example, the need to engage in dialogue with narrators rather than simply to rely on the researcher's interpretations, or to interrogate more of the relationship between interviewer and narrator, which cannot simply be captured by notions of 'insiderness'. The insider may, Gluck suggests, be disadvantaged by the assumptions she makes about shared meanings or the interviewer might make about her (Armitage and Gluck, 2006). While there remains a powerful political imperative to recover more and diverse women's stories, the researcher has a duty to 'historicize' and interrogate any account. This includes not only the broader conditions of women's lives, but also the interpersonal, political and social contexts in which narratives are collected. How women may 'perform' their stories has also to be interrogated, since this may be culturally rooted. While shifts in emotional tone might denote special meanings for some women, in certain cultures, among older Palestinian women, for instance, these may reflect cultural prescriptions for telling stories rather than individual states of mind (Armitage and Gluck, 2006).

Oral history has been employed in many other contexts, including by development and aid workers to, 'gain a better understanding of the concerns and priorities, culture and experiences of the people with whom they wish to work. Oral testimony can give those communities more power to set their own agenda for development' (Slim and Thompson, 1993: 1). It provides, once again, space and an audience for the voices of those living in poor and marginalised communities. This is accompanied by major methodological debates around voice, the nature of the interview and memory (see Perks and Thomson (2006) for important contributions on these issues by diverse oral historians). Such concerns lie at the heart of biographical research too.

Enter the Chicago School of sociology

The epic work of William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki on the experiences of Polish migrants to the United States of America – *The Polish Peasant* – first published 1918–1921, stands as one of the earliest and most important pieces of biographical research. It is now regarded as a classic sociological work, and historically significant because it inaugurated, alongside the research of Park and Burgess (see below), a movement from positivistic approaches to more constructivist ideas of how the social order was created as well as being open to change. These studies were crucial in the emergence of the Chicago School of sociology.

Thomas and Znaniecki's work was grounded in empirical research and sought to synthesise theory and data, in contrast to other forms of sociology of the time, which were more theoretical. Thomas gathered data largely through documents such as letters written and sent to a Polish newspaper by peasants migrating to America, and through the biography of a young Polish peasant called Wladek Wiszniewski. At the time the use of letters and biographies was innovative in sociological research, and, as Herbert Blumer points out: 'The life history of Wladek was the first systematically collected sociological life history' (1984: 54). It was also of interest because Wiszniewski was paid for writing his life history, which was 250 pages long.

For Thomas and Znaniecki personal documents provided the basis for theorising what they termed the disintegration process faced by immigrants. Their focus also encompassed the integration and reintegration of individuals and their families into new lives and cultures (Hammersley, 1998; Sztompka, 1984). The use of personal documents and accounts established a greater understanding of social life through the interactions of the self with groups and the wider society. Autobiographies gave insights into an individual's life process and his/her interaction with others (Bron, 1999). Thomas and Znaniecki argued that: 'We are safe in saying that personal life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material'. (1958: 1832). Subjectivity and inductivity – allowing narrative material to lead the researcher, rather than simply testing pre-established theory, in the manner of the natural sciences – were brought to the heart of social research.

Case study: An extract from Wladek's autobiography

In the USA: Franciszek came the same evening and almost invited himself to be bridegroom, promising to bring brandy, beer, wine and to pay for the auto. And all would have been quite well if it had not been for another trouble. On January 14th I was dismissed. And the reason was the following: This year the winter was rather hard, so it was very cold in the bakery, for we baked little. Every night I had to wait three or four hours after making the rolls, and having nothing to do I lay upon the table near the oven and fell asleep. It very seldom happened that I over-slept even a little, and I had never spoiled anything and the rolls were always in time. This time I did the same, but I slept perhaps half an hour longer than I needed, and Mr Z. found me sleeping. He got angry, although I should not have spoiled anything even if I slept two hours more … During this week I did not try to get work, for I had occupation enough at home, preparing for the wedding …

And with me things went on worse and worse, for after my wedding I remained with $5, while my wife gave $10 to the butcher. I could not find work in spite of my efforts. Brother-in-law could not or would not get work for me; I went from one cousin of my wife to another, asking them to get work for me, but they could not or would not either, although all of them worked in the stockyards … It would really have been better if I had died long ago, for I have no hope of getting work … It is awfully difficult to get work without protec-tion, because of the terrible crisis brought by the European war … I cannot even now take a walk with my wife, for she has not even shoes to put on her feet, but wears my old shoes. And she must bear all this through me, for I brought her to this. (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958: 2220–1, 2225)

Thomas and Znaniecki, as stated, had considerable influence on the Chicago School of sociology, which emerged around 1920. As did the urban research of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess and their students (Bulmer, 1984). Park and Burgess were interested in using the city as a site of study: they wanted to engage with the 'real world'. Howard Becker later recalled what Park considered this to be, as told to him when a student of Park's. Although Park is referring to observation, the account summarises the spirit at work in the School more widely.

Park (please note the dominant use of the male person, characteristic of its time):

You have been told to go grubbing in the library thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial sched-ules prepared by tired bureaucrats and filled out by reluctant applicants for aid or fussy do-gooders or indifferent clerks. This is 'called getting your hands dirty in real research'. Those who thus counsel you are wise and honourable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one thing more is needful; first hand

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> observation. Go and sit in the lounge of the luxury hotels and on the door-steps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesk. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research. (McKinney, 1966: 71)
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> Why do you think that Park feels that 'real research' is the most useful and valuable?

Likewise, the influence of W.I. Thomas and George Herbert Mead in the development of the School, was great. Chicago sociologists and social psychologists (disciplinary divisions were less solidified then), perpetually got the seats of their pants dirty by engaging in intensive fieldwork among immigrants, young criminals, the poor, etc., and in their own environments. They used various methods and obtained quantitative as well as qualitative data. The researchers preferred the case study and thought it the most useful approach in building theoretical understanding forged in the light of lived experience. One way of building case studies was via participant observation but personal documents such as autobiographical writing were also used.

The Jack Roller

Working in the tradition pioneered by Thomas and Znaniecki and the Chicago School of sociology, Clifford R. Shaw published *the Jack Roller* in 1930 (republished in 1966). This is a monumental and classic life history of a teenage delinquent called Stanley. It is a study in criminology providing an understanding of delinquency from the viewpoint and story of the delinquent. Ken Plummer in his book *Documents of Life* stresses the historical significance of the study for biographical research:

> I think it is the most amous case study in criminology, and one of the most frequently discussed in sociology. It has – rightly or wrongly – an almost 'canonical' status amongst life histories (second only, perhaps, to Wladek). (2001: 106)

The Jack Roller involves 'Stanley' and his career in delinquency (although Shaw also researched other delinquents in the study). Stanley was 14 when Shaw first met him. He had been in custody with the police several times for truanting from school, shoplifting and pick pocketing, following an unhappy childhood in which he was brought up by a stepmother (whom he disliked), in a poor area of Chicago. For Shaw, the boy's story formed the central element of his research,

> as a device for ascertaining the personal attitudes, feelings and interests of the child; in other words, it shows how he conceives his role in relation to other persons and the interpretations which he makes of the situations in which he lives. It is in the personal document that the child reveals his feelings of inferiority and superiority,

his fears and worries, his ideals and philosophy of life, his antagonisms and mental conflicts, his prejudices and rationalizations. (1966: 3–4).

Interestingly, and there are echoes of this in feminist research decades later, Shaw struck up a close relationship with Stanley. The latter said, many years later, that 'the Shaws were my real parents' (in Snodgrass, 1982: 171) and that Shaw was the only person who had any influence over him. Shaw, through Stanley's biography, illustrates how crime is learned, the impact of life in a city and the role of labelling theory in shaping a career of crime.

Case study

Stanley tells his story in his own words and begins by reflecting on his family life:

As far back as I can remember my life was filled with sorrow and misery. The cause was my stepmother, who nagged me, beat me, insulted me, and drove me out of my own home. My mother died when I was four years old, so I never knew a real mother's affection.

My father remarried when I was five years of age. The stepmother who was to take the place of my real mother was a raw-boned woman, devoid of features as well as emotions … The woman he married had seven children, and a bad lot they were, and there were eight in our family, making 15 in all. We all tried to live together in five rooms. It wasn't long before trouble started. My stepmother started to raise hell. She favoured her children in every way. She blamed us for everything that happened, and gave them the best of the food … The stepmother done with us just what she pleased. We were well abused and continuously …

So I grew old enough to go out on the street. The life in the streets and alleys became fascinating and enticing. I had two companions that I looked up to with childish admiration and awe … One was William my stepbrother. They were close friends four years older than me and well versed in the art of stealing …

One day my stepmother told William to take me to the railroad yard to break into box-cars. William always led the way and made the plans. He would open the cars, and I would crawl in and hand out the merchandise. We filled our cart, which we had made for this purpose, and proceeded towards home. After we arrived home with our ill-gotten goods, my stepmother would meet us and pat me on the back and say that I was a good boy and that I would be rewarded. Rewarded, bah! Rewarded with kicks and cuffs. (Shaw, 1966: 47, 50, 52, 200)

The study highlights the principles of symbolic interactionism in focusing on the subjectivity of the social world and in deriving understanding from the experience and interpretations of subjects themselves. For Shaw and other symbolic interactionists biographies revealed the interplay of the social and psychological in intimate and personal aspects of life (a viewpoint shared by later feminist researchers), which tended to be missed altogether or considered inconsequential in other forms of research. Becker wrote an introduction, in the second edition of Shaw's book, extolling the value

and merits of the 'life history' method, and how it was essential in the development of theoretical insight into the processes by which the social order is constructed: 'The life history, more than any other technique except perhaps participant observation, can give meaning to the overworked notion of process' (Becker, 1966: xiii).

He went on to describe the distinguishing features of this method compared to other approaches:

> As opposed to these more imaginative and humanistic forms, the life history is more down to earth, more devoted to our purposes than those of the author, less concerned with artistic values than with a faithful rendering of the subject's experience and interpretation of the world he lives in. The sociologist who gathers a life history takes steps to ensure that it covers everything we want to know, that no important fact or event is slighted. That what purports to be factual squares with other available evidence and that the subject's interpretations are honestly given. The sociologist keeps the subjects oriented to the questions sociology is interested in, asks him about events that require amplification, tries to make the story told jibe with matters of official record and with material furnished by others familiar with the person, event or place being described. He keeps the game honest for us. In so doing he pursues the job from his own perspective, a perspective which emphasizes the value of the person's 'own story'. (Becker, 1966: vi)

Shaw and others in Chicago continued to produce research using the biographical method until the 1960s. Some, like Ernest Burgess, combined life history with statistical methods and saw no contradiction in doing so while also insisting that case studies were more than the equal, methodologically, of statistical approaches. In a discussion at the end of the 1966 edition of *The Jack Roller,* Burgess highlighted the contribution of personal documents:

> To many readers the chief value of this document will not consist in its contribution to an understanding of the personality of Stanley and other delinquents or of the methods of treatment of similar cases. To them its far-reaching significance will inhere in the illumination it throws on the causation, under conditions of modern city life, of criminal careers and upon the social psychology of the new type of criminal youth (Burgess, 1966: 196).

Other sociologists in Chicago continued to use the case study method from the 1940s onwards. Many focused on deviancy, such as William Foote Whyte (1943) and his well-known work, *Street Corner Society.* There was also Becker's (1963) study *Outsiders* and David Matza's (1969) research, *Becoming Deviant.* Some of this work drew on participant observation but there were many parallels and similarities between this and biographical approaches.

A decline, but keeping the spirit alive

Yet by the 1960s the application of biographical methods outside the Chicago School of sociology had declined. For people like Becker, who lauded the approach, this was surprising, 'given the variety of scientific uses to which the life history may be put,

one must wonder at the relative neglect into which it has fallen' (Becker, 1966: xvi). Becker suggested some reasons for this. Sociologists had become obsessed with abstract theory rather than the lives of people. Moreover, as social psychology separated into its own field, sociologists became preoccupied with the structural aspects of social life. Becker argued that, by the mid-1960s, sociology had become overly 'rigid' and 'professionalised' as research moved to being more 'scientific'. Positivism and quantitative research assumed a dominant position in an obsession for more 'scientific approaches' and the search for objective 'truth', via the work, among others, of Talcott Parsons.

However, sociologists such as C. Wright Mills (1970) and John Berger (1966) kept the older spirit alive. They sought to maintain a humanistic set of values in sociology, including the desire to create a more socially just world. C. Wright Mills (1970, originally published in 1959), in his seminal book *the Sociological Imagination* discussed the fundamental issues of sociology by stressing that biography represents a meeting point of history, social structures and the individual agent. The social world is forged in such an interaction, and biography is the site in which struggles to build lives and to create better worlds – however problematic and contested – are played out. The 'sociological imagination', C. Wright Mills stated:

> Enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society … No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey. (1970: 12)

His advice to social scientists was to think about the premises underlying their assumptions about how people and society worked:

> Always keep your eyes open to the image of man – the generic notion of … human nature – which by your work you are assuming and implying; and also to the image of history – your notion of how history is being made. In a word, continually work out and revise your views of the problems of history, the problems of biography, and the problems of a social structure in which biography and history intersect. Keep your eyes open to the varieties of individuality, and to the modes of epochal change. Use what you see and what you imagine as the clues to your study of the human variety … know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of society occur; and that within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (Wright Mills, 1970: 247–8)

C. Wright Mills implied, in this, a commitment to interdisciplinary understanding of how macro-level forces and social structure find expression in the inner world and the interplay between them. Such a commitment continues to inspire researchers, including the present authors.

More recent times – and some questions

The Chicago School tradition continued, if on the margins, in the 1960s and 1970s, in the work of researchers such as Becker, Goffman, Downes, Rock, Matza and Lemert. They undertook sociological studies at the micro level, from the perspectives of phenomenology and ethnomethodology, mostly focusing, as stated, on the concepts of career, labelling and deviance. Like the work of previous generations at Chicago they pursued a naturalistic approach: understanding behaviour in 'real' social and cultural contexts, from the perspectives of the actors. They also continued the older tradition of highlighting the plight of the powerless – the underdog – giving voice and illuminating the injustices of power. The position was neatly summarised by Becker (1967) when he argued that researchers should constantly ask themselves: 'whose side are you on'?

Norman Denzin, however, considered that there was a danger of the stories of individuals becoming a kind of narrative heroic fiction and that Stanley was simply 'a sociological version of a screen hero' (1992: 41). He continued:

> Shaw and Burgess conflated the flesh and blood subjects (the real Stanley) with the empirical subject (the youth who was interviewed) and turned him into an analytic, ideal type, the classic inner city delinquent. He then became a complex first and second order textual production. Stanley and Clifford Shaw … cannot be uncoupled, for to take Shaw (and Burgess) out of the picture is to leave only an empty story of Stanley. There is no Stanley without the investigative tale told by these two sociological experts. The natural history, life history method permitted the illusion to be sustained: that the real Stanley, and the real Stanley's experiences, had been captured. (Denzin, 1992: 41)

There are glimpses here of contemporary debates, echoing those in oral history, surrounding 'auto/biography' and the need to bring the researcher, and issues of power as well as of the complexities of representation, into an understanding of the construction of biographical accounts. A simplistic 'realism' was increasingly challenged. But Denzin was no enemy of biographical research either and from the 1970s became a prolific writer on qualitative research, interpretativism and biography. He explained that:

> The biographical method rests on subjective and intersubjectively gained knowledge and understandings of the life experiences of individuals, including one's own life. Such understandings rest on an interpretative process that leads one to enter into the emotional life of another. Interpretation, the act of interpreting and making sense out of something, creates the conditions for understanding, which involves being able to grasp the meanings of an interpreted experience for another individual. Understanding is an intersubjective, emotional experience. Its goal is to build sharable understandings of the life experiences of another. (Denzin, 1989b: 28)

Denzin elaborated, in this context, the importance of 'turning point moments' or 'epiphanies' in life histories. He defined 'the biographical method as the studied use and collection of life documents that describe turning-point moments' (1989b: 69).

Epiphanies are 'interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives. In them, personal character is manifested. They are often moments of crisis which alter the fundamental meaning and structures in a person's life. Their effects may be positive or negative' (1989b: 70). The notion and place of epiphanies in learners' lives has a strong contemporary resonance in research on adult students in higher education (Merrill, 1999; West, 1996).

Enter feminism

By the late 1960s second wave feminism was proving influential in the academy, particularly in the United Kingdom and North America but also in the French-speaking world (see Ollagnier, 2007). Feminism looked back to the Chicago School but also to the later work of C. Wright Mills (1970). It was concerned with the pervasive influence of gender in people's lives, its positioning and constructing subjects in particular ways, and how this tended to marginalise the lived experiences of women. Feminism and feminist research methods derived from the commitment to giving voice to women previously hidden in social science research or his-story. Social science departments in universities were dominated by male academics and the research topics reflected this in the choice of male factory workers, youth cultures and boys, as well as male pupils in schools.

Feminist academics sought to redress the imbalance. Biographical approaches were deemed highly appropriate to the task: 'Biographical work has always been an important part of the women's movement because it draws women out of obscurity, repairs the historical record, and provides an opportunity for the woman reader and writer to identify with the subject' (Reinharz, 1992: 126). In the UK, Anna Pollert's (1981) sociological study of working-class women working at a cigarette factory in Bristol, and Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's (1976) of girls and youth cultures were early biographical studies which sought to bring particular women out of invisibility.

Feminism encompassed a critical perspective that challenged some of the ideas of conventional research, as patriarchal and phallocentric: for treating interviewees as subordinates and for promoting relationships characterised by hierarchy. In contrast feminist researchers sought to build equal relationships between interviewers and interviewees. Ann Oakley (1981) argued that a biographical interview should be a two-way process – a conversation – in which the interviewer also answers questions asked by the interviewee about the self. The process of interviewing became central to the method, as we explore further in Chapter 7.

Feminists developed the principle that research and interviewing should not exploit the interviewee but seek to empower her. Likewise the process was a self-learning experience for the interviewer, as Shulamit Reinharz asserted: 'Once the project begins, a circular process ensues: the woman doing the study learns about herself as well as about the woman she is studying' (1992: 127). Both American (Reinharz) and UK feminists (for example, Oakley, Stanley) have been influential in the establishment of biographical methodology. Women's stories highlighted their oppression in society but also provided a means to transform women's lives,

illustrating how individual problems are also collective ones (Skeggs, 1997). Like C. Wright Mills, feminists argued that the 'personal is political'. For Liz Stanley and Sue Wise 'a feminist social science should begin with the recognition that "the personal", direct experience, underlies all behaviours and action' (1993: 164). The influence of these ideas was to find expression in research with other and diverse marginalised groups (Plummer, 2001).

Feminist biographical research often revealed not only issues of gender inequality and oppression but also their interaction with other forms of inequality, such as class and race. Amrit Wilson's moving book (*Finding a Voice*, 1978) on Asian women was an early British example highlighting how black women's lives were not only racialised but also gendered and classed. At the end of her book Wilson reflected on her work and why she wrote it:

> Because I felt that Asian women had so much to tell, I wanted to write a book in which they could express their opinions and feelings. There have been things written about Asian women which show them always as a group who can't speak for themselves. They were just treated as objects – nothing more. That they have any feelings about their own lives or that they can analyse their own lives never comes up. I wanted to show how Asian women are capable of speaking for themselves. (Wilson, 1978: 166)

In the USA bell hooks and other black feminists were influential in criticising the feminism of white feminists arguing that their theories and writings did not recognise the experiences and voices of being black and female. Another important American group of feminists in the late 1980s was the Personal Narratives Group. Using an interpretative approach, they saw an important aim of research was to gain enhanced understanding from stories. This was seen as a complex process in which women may get confused, even lie and get things wrong. Yet this was also a kind of truth and the task of the interpreter was to understand why this might be so and to what purpose, within the social and personal landscapes of women's lives, past and present. The group sought to discuss the complex meaning of truth in their study *Interpreting Women's Lives* (Personal Narratives Group, 1989).

Research, under the influence of feminism, became increasingly presented and celebrated as a participatory enterprise, not least in the practices of collective biography. The focus could be on processes of subjectivation in women's lives, including in educational contexts, and how people may learn to separate mind from body as well as how other aspects of an external order are imposed. But this can be resisted too, via story telling, written and spoken, producing collective webs of experience to challenge subjectivication. Some of this collective biography draws on the theoretical work of Judith Butler concerning the discursive construction of subjectivity through the dominant narratives of a culture and resistance to them (Butler, 1997; Davies and Gannon, 2006). The assumptions we make about the subject, and subjectivity, in biographical research, remains a major issue.

A participatory ethos, shaped by feminism, has also characterised the use of biographical research in the study of adult and lifelong learning (Armstrong, 1998). Much European work (Bron, Edwards, Merrill) initially focused on women's experience – especially working-class women – of studying in higher education. The research

placed the subjects of enquiry as central to the research process, arguing for their voices to be taken into account in relation to policy decisions and adult education. Both Arlene McClaren (1985) and Rosalind Edwards (1993), as ex-mature students themselves, drew on their biographies and included the researcher's self in their studies of mature women students in universities. Their work explored how women students manage in juggling different life roles, with Edwards' study focusing on the relationship between family and education. Merrill (1999), as noted, was interested in women and class, using biographies to illustrate the inter-relationship between private and public lives, the dialectics of agency and structure and the linking of individual biographies to the collective.

Auto/biography

Feminists in the 1980s argued that researchers persistently refuse to interrogate how they generate their stories, echoing arguments in oral history. There was a presumption, as in the natural sciences, that theories and methods neutralise personal and political influences. Conventional detachment and distance were described as a 'fetish', a 'God trick … that mode of seeing that pretends to offer a vision that is from everywhere and nowhere, equally and fully' (Haraway, 1988: 208). Such tricks presented fictions of the 'truth' while denying the interests, privilege and power of the researcher. Michelle Fine (1992) argued for the reflexive and self-reflexive potential of experience, in which the knower is part of the matrix of what is known, and where the researcher needs to ask her/himself in what way has s/he grown in, and shaped the processes of research. The term 'auto/biography' was coined to draw attention to the inter-relationship between the constructions of one's own life though autobiography and the construction of the life of another through biography. The implication is that we cannot write stories about ourselves without making reference to and hence constructing others' lives and selves, and those constructions we make of others in writing their life histories contain and reflect our own histories and social and cultural locations as well as psychologies. A rich seam of explicitly auto/biographical work has emerged over the last two decades (Miller, 2007; Stanley, 1992; Steedman, 1986; West, 1996).

Critical theory and post-structuralism

There have been other influences in the development of biographical research. Critical theory has played a role in biographical approaches within sociology, decades after its establishment at the University of Frankfurt during the 1920s. Some key players have been Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse who drew on earlier critical theorists such as Karl Marx, G.W.F. Hegel and Immanuel Kant, but rejected, for example, the idea of economic determinism. A key purpose of research for critical theorists was to use it to highlight inequalities and oppression and through agency transform society. Research was seen as a political

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act: 'Thus critical researchers enter into an investigation with their assumptions on the table, so no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them to the research site' (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2003: 453). As Lincoln and Denzin explain:

> The critique and concern of the critical theorists has been an effort to design a ped-agogy of resistance within communities of difference. The pedagogy of resistance, of taking back 'voice', of reclaiming narrative for one's own rather than adapting to the narratives of a dominant majority, was most explicitly laid out by Paulo Freire in his work with adults in Brazil. (2003: 625–6)

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in England, during the 1970s and 1980s, undertook ethnographic/biographical research from a critical perspective. Paul Willis' classic study, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs* (1977), epitomised the orientation of the Centre. In Denmark, in recent years, biographical methods have been used in the study of working life and learning, using critical theory, alongside social psy-chology and psychoanalysis (Salling Olesen, 2007a, 2007b; Weber, 2007).

Post-structuralism's prime focus has been on language and discourse and how these serve to position people and to construct who they are and how they think about themselves. We perceive the world, and ourselves, through the eye of language, which is far from neutral. Post-structuralists, including many feminists, have encouraged an interrogation of the role of language, illustrated in the work of Patti Lather (1991), David Jackson (1990) and the feminist Liz Stanley (1992) as well as Judith Butler (1997). Reality and meaning are always linked to other texts and meaning. 'Social science is no longer a straightforward description of reality out there; instead, the terms used become discussed, elaborated upon and contested' (Plummer, 2001: 198).

Yet, as Plummer has noted (2001), there can be a bleakness and pessimism at the heart of some post-structuralist perceptions of biographical approaches and humanistic aspirations. Michel Foucault could be depressingly cynical about the value of human stories: lives, in his perspective, are shaped by power/knowledge formations about which the people involved may have little understanding. Yet Plummer asserts – and this is a view we share – if language and symbolic commu-nication are central to being human we also have the capacity for reflexivity – for learning – and greater self-awareness, including how power/knowledge, mediated through language, can shape us to the core (2001: 262). A humanistic project – in the sense of taking human beings and their experiences as a base line – remains possible, however fractured and problematic this might be.

Psychology

Psychology, at least in its mainstream guises, has sometimes inoculated itself against this kind of philosophical turmoil by positioning the discipline as more of a natural science. Psychologists, as Louis Smith (1998) noted, in consequence, have had difficulty with biography as a research method. Yet there has always been a

subsidiary strand influenced by psychoanalysis and feminism and the need for more humanistic and critical perspectives. Freud of course used case study biographies – as with Little Hans and 'Dora' – to develop his theories on the role of the dynamic unconscious (of what cannot be thought or said and its place in human action) and of sexual repression in human life and its consequences (Freud, 1977). Moreover, Freud used the biographical form to compose biographies of important creative and historical figures such as Leonardo De Vinci (Freud, 1910/1963). Leon Edel (1985) also employed psychoanalytic perspectives for probing issues of interpretation and meaning in a number of biographies.

There have been some psychologists who sought a middle ground. Gordon Allport (1937) produced a series of works on the use of personal documents in psychology. He undertook a study of Jenny (Allport, 1964), via a collection of letters she wrote to her son and daughter-in-law. These provide 'vivid, troubling, introspective accounts of both her life as a working woman and her mental states', as a basis for considering a number of competing theories to interpret the letters (Smith, 1994: 297). An 'eclectic' emphasis on biology, family and social circumstances alongside biography appears, Smith notes, from time to time in psychology, at least on its margins. Eric Erickson (1959, 1963a, 1963b) used life writing as a way of exploring developmental stages in human beings, and other psychologists have used biography to clarify their hypotheses, as in the work of Hudson (1966). The desire to use biographical and narrative material to build a more humanistic form of psychology has never entirely disappeared (Smith, 1994).

Feminist psychologists, especially, have sought to ensure that the discipline remembered the whole people, and social contexts, easily neglected in the predilection for experimental methods. For many mainstream psychologists the experimental laboratory was celebrated because it was 'sterile, neutral, and fully appropriate for eliciting 'objective' phenomenon while holding the "noise" of social context and background variables silent' (Fine and Gordon, 1992: 11). Gender could be represented as 'noise' in many social psychology studies. Yet, feminist psychologists argued, women were noisy because their data did not neatly conform to the male patterns (or universal laws) that tended to dominate the mainstream. Such work was often built on a lack of trust, longevity and connection in research: female subjects, so the argument proceeded, were turned into the objects of the experimenter. An alternative critical set of feminist voices found space, and there was great sympathy for narrative and biographical approaches. These alternative traditions are represented, for instance, by Carol Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice*, Mary Field Belenky et al.'s (1997) *Women's Ways of Knowing* and various studies of Hispanic, black and lesbian women (Fine, 1992). Subjects, and the meanings they gave to experience, were placed more at the centre of this kind of psychology, in opposition to the mainstream (or 'male-stream') tendency to flatten, de-gender and depoliticise understanding.

Some feminist psychologists contributed to the alternative collective biographical movement by exploring the body and sexuality, calling on members of a group to write down memories of past events that focus on this physical area. Stories can then be discussed, reassessed and reworked on a group basis. Frigga Haug and colleagues (1987), for example, in Germany, were interested in the therapeutic outcomes of their

work by building a greater capacity to resist oppressive and often masculinist versions of femininity and the body.

Education and the study of adult learning

Biographical methodologies have secured a place in the study of education, albeit on the margins. There is a tradition of using life history and biography in the study of the subjective experiences of being a teacher in the United Kingdom (Goodson, 1992; Goodson and Sykes, 2001; Woods, 1994). Ivor Goodson (1994) has argued that teachers' life experience and careers shape their vision of teaching and how this is to be approached, complementing those methods that are mainly concerned with the analysis of interactions in the classroom. The lifeworld and life history of the teacher, away from school, have a direct impact on teaching and what s/he seeks to achieve. In this perspective, teachers are agents in the building of knowledge and the development of a repertoire of responses, however prescribed.

Biographical researchers have also worked among marginalised groups in educational settings, for instance, among those with learning disabilities. This is partly about challenging the negative labelling of people and seeking to give them a voice. Jan Walmsley (2006) has mapped some of this work but also its difficulties, not least when researching with those who may lack basic literacy and whose standpoints have been so neglected in the research literature that orientation is difficult, such as using one's own knowledge to generate questions. The introductory letter, the return of the transcript for correction, the provision of a finished account are all rendered problematic. Yet Walmsley, among others, has described how such difficulties can be negotiated, although the problem of voice, and whose voice is represented, has been an issue.

The study of adult learning and education was long dominated by quantitative surveys (for example, Woodley et al., 1987). One challenge to this came from feminist work on women's experiences of higher education (e.g. Edwards, 1993; McClaren, 1985). Both McClaren and Edwards, as noted above, had been mature women students and brought the personal directly into their texts. By the early 1990s, the proportion of papers at SCUTREA (the Standing Conference of University Teachers and Researchers in the Education of Adults, which is Britain's pre-eminent professional network for researchers in the field of adult and lifelong learning) concerned with life stories, narratives, transformations of selves and struggles over identity, located in socio-cultural contexts, was increasing. In 1988 only two papers had used life history – broadly defined – as an alternative method (Armstrong, 1998), but this was to become a mainstream preoccupation in the 1990s. It was not just a British phenomenon, either, as evidenced in the number of papers devoted to life history and auto/biography in meetings such as the North American Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) (see e.g. Sork et al., 2000). The trend has continued (see West et al., 2001).

The use of biographical approaches in the study of adult learning in France has a well-established history, shaped by the work of Pierre Dominicé (Switzerland), Guy Villers (Belgium) and Gaston Pineau (a Canadian living in France): 'Through their dialogue, respective life trajectories and fields of interest they created and lent

solidarity to a body of thought which has become a reference in the matter of life history in adult education' (Ollagnier, 2002: 274). Adult education and life histories became a strong movement and in 1990 a French research network was established: the Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation (ASIHVIF) (International Association for Life History in Adult Education). In Germany there is a strong tradition of biographical research in both sociology and education, although it is outside the sociological mainstream (Apitzsch and Inowlocki, 2000). Interestingly, there have been major debates in Germany, because of the Nazi era, which include concern about overly naive readings of biographical accounts. Biographies and story telling need always to be critically examined in the light of tendencies towards evasion, silence, and even lies, in people's stories, especially in relation to difficult times (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995; Rosenthal, 1993).

Within adult education, the work of Peter Alheit has been prominent and influential among adult education researchers across Europe. He has explored how the individualisation of society has resulted in a new paradigm of learning, centred on the necessity of composing biographies. Yet this has to be accomplished in circumstances where people may feel what happens to them is often outside their control, whatever the rhetoric to the contrary (Alheit, 1993; Alheit and Dausien, 2007). The work of Ulrich Oevermann has likewise been important in bringing therapeutic insights to education and life histories in social conditions of flux, unpredictability and emotional strain (see Alheit and Dausien, 2007). The German tradition in life histories has tended, however, towards a more 'scientific' and less subjectivist stance, influenced by 19th-century German philosophers and more recently the work of Fritz Schutze (1992) and Gabriele Rosenthal (2004). Feminism has tended to be more marginal.

Looking forward

In the next chapter, we map more of the contemporary field of biographical research, which has increased in scope and complexity since the early days of oral history or the Chicago School. In Chapter 4, we return to some philosophical and theoretical issues touched on in the present chapter. If chronicling lived experience, however problematic, matters to biographical researchers, theory matters greatly too.

Key points

- Story telling has been important for centuries as a means of communicating itra- and intergenerationally.
- Oral historians have used stories as a means of giving voice to marginalised groups, as part of a broader, egalitarian social purpose. There is nowadays a more sophisticated debate about the problems of doing this.
- The Chicago School of sociology has been important in the development of biographical methods, not least in seeking to ground an understanding of social processes in the experiences of the people at their heart.

(Continued)

Using Biographical Methods in Social Research

(Continued)

- Feminism has had a major influence in terms of both the focus but also in developing and interrogating the processes of biographical research.
- Biographical methods have been more marginal in psychology and education, but there have been strong subsidiary strands.

FURTHER READING

Bulmer, M. (1984) *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalisation, Diversity and the Rise of Sociological Research.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J. and Wengraf, T. (2000) (eds) *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science.* London: Routledge.

Fine, M. (1992) *Disruptive Voices. The Possibilities of Feminist Research.* Michigan: Michigan University Press.

Perks, R. and Thomson, A. (2006) (eds) *Oral History Reader* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do you think oral testimony, oral history and biography should be considered a political project?

2. To what degree do you think ethnographic studies like Shaw's *The Jack Roller* transform life histories into fiction, as Denzin (1992) states, making them a 'sociological version of a screen hero'?

ACTIVITIES

1. Talk to someone from an older generation – a relative, parent, etc. – and ask them about their past life and any historical events which they can remember.
2. Reflect on your life history – how has history played out in your time/life, for example, war, fundamentalism, etc.?
3. Thomas and Znaniecki: *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* – Looking at analysis.

Read the extract below taken from the conclusion of Thomas and Znaniecki's book, consisting of their analysis of Wladek's biography, and consider the questions posed at the end.

We have determined analytically in the notes the most important facts in Wladek's personal evolution, and we add at this point a brief synthesis of this evolution.

In so far as his temperamental background is concerned, Wladek is perfectly normal, in the sense that there is neither a striking lack nor a striking excess of any temperamental attitude. His organism is healthy without being particularly powerful, and he shows great physical endurance. His sexual impulses are rather intense but never overwhelming, and are subordinated without difficulty to the demands of practical life. Like the average members of his class he uses alcohol freely, but no permanently disorganizing biological effects are noticeable in his behaviour. And we find in his temperament neither any exceptional buoyancy which would push him to search continually for new experiences in any one line nor any exceptional depression that would lead to a too great stability … His intellectual abilities are above the average, as is shown by the facility with which he learns in school and in the army and by the clever way in which he handles the superficial notions about the world and life which he gained from his unsystematic reading and occasional intercourse with more instructed people, and by his ability to work out general ideas about social conditions on the ground of his experiences and observations. His intellectual limitations are simply due to the lack of systematic training in theoretic thinking, not to insufficient inborn capacity …

Certain social conditions being given, Wladek's evolution would depend on his attitudes toward the social values constituting these conditions, and vice versa, given certain attitudes toward social values, the social conditions in which he found himself would determine his evolution. The relative importance of different personal attitudes on the one hand, and of different social values on the other hand, may vary within wide limits, and in trying to reconstruct synthetically his personality we must determine first of all the attitudes and conditions which played the greatest part in his evolution, and characterize his type in terms of these…

The most important attitude – or rather, set of attitudes – by which Wladek's evolution is conditioned is the 'social instinct'. He is always completely and exclusively dependent upon society. Even if at moments he isolates himself voluntarily, it is either only a temporary reaction to some rebuke or the desire to attract attention by withdrawing to the background. (1958: 2227–9)

- How might biographical interpretation and analysis have changed since this early biographical work? (Read an extract from a recent text.)
- What did you think about the language in this extract?