Life story and narrative approaches in the study of family lives

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Abstract

The chapter addresses the production of auto/biography through the application of biographical methods on the one hand, and the use of narrative analysis, on the other. It does so through an intergenerational study that focuses on changes in fatherhood across family generations. It begins with a discussion of the key features of biographical methods and narrative analysis. It then goes on to demonstrate a method that brings both approaches together - the biographic-narrative interpretive method (BNIM) – in the analysis of some data from a study on fatherhood. The chapter analyses two life story interviews conducted with a grandfather and his adult son. The biographical analysis situates their lives in historical context and reveals patterns of continuity and change across the generations. Through a narrative analysis, life stories are understood as 'narrative accomplishments' – as products of the ways in which interviewees construct their identities, focussing on turning points in their lives, in the interview encounters and over time. The chapter aims to show how bringing together biographical and narrative approaches produces a multi-layered analysis of auto/biography.

Introduction

The term auto/biography refers to a record, spoken or written, of a person's past life and the life course transitions and events that make it up; auto/biographies are examinations of people's experiences and life course trajectories relating to family life and other social domains. But auto/biographies are more than this: they are stories or narratives that people tell about themselves. This chapter focuses on life stories as autobiographical accounts that were invited in the context of a research interview in a study that focused upon fatherhood across three generations.

Where life stories are embedded in an interview they can encompass different ends of the 'narrative spectrum' from stories of a whole life to what Bamberg (2006) terms 'small stories' or partial narratives that refer to parts of people's lives. The invitation to recount a life story in the knowledge that members of other generations in a family are asked to do the same presents research participants with a particular task – to reflect not only on family life but what is passed down the generations. As Carl Smart suggests, family members are part of lineages and each family member carries with them 'echoes of the past'.

'*It is impossible to imagine a family without the sense that it is part of a lineage; that the people who are the current parent generation are the children of the previous generation and that they carry with them some sense or aura (not to mention genes) of those who have gone before. Being part of a lineage carries with it echoes of the past, plus an embeddedness in what went (or who went) before. The past and the present are therefore intertwined and each gives meaning to the other*' (Smart, 2011 p543).

In understanding family life as both the reproduction of the past and as the engagement with and transformation of the present and future, biographical and narrative approaches are well-suited to the interpretation of accounts and experiences of several generations in a family. In the rest of the chapter, I will draw upon my research on the study of multi-generation families in which biographical and narrative methods were applied. As an exemplar of the application of these approaches I will take the life stories of a migrant grandfather and his adult son. This exemplar will demonstrate how an auto/biographical or life story approach produces core accounts of interviewees' lives that are likely to be 'well-established, repeated versions of events' that re-present significant turning points in their reported biographies. (Atkinson and Sampson 2019 p64).

But first the chapter will begin with a very brief history of the development of biographical approaches and a discussion of some of the differences between biographical and narrative research before going on to elaborate which aspects of these approaches were applied to the analysis of fatherhood in interviews with a grandfather and his adult son.

Biographical methods

Key figures who shaped the development of biographical methods are William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, members of the Chicago School in the early twentieth century. Their book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* is considered to be the first biographical study in sociology.[i] At the time Chicago was the fastest growing North-American city with a huge immigrant population that had more than its share of social problems. These researchers set out to study the families, communities and social ties of the Polish migrants both before and after migration, drawing on personal documents, such as life histories, letters, diaries, and other first-person material. This work had a major influence on the urban sociologists in the Chicago School[ii]; they treated the biographical material they collected as individual 'cases' in the sense of the term employed in social work (Nilsen and Brannen 2011) while analysing these in the relation to the communities in which they were situated.

A second key figure typically cited in the history of biographical approaches is C. Wright Mills (e.g. 1980[1959]) whose insistence that equal attention be paid to history and biography left an indelible mark on sociology. Like those in the Chicago school he too drew on American Pragmatism. Although Mills did not carry out biographical research, his influence on the field was significant especially in contributing to the revival of biographical methods in the 1970s.

A third key figure is Glen Elder whose cohort studies were ground breaking in their analysis of the life course and its relationship to historical processes, social structure and social institutions. Elder's understanding of the life course consisted in 'age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history… a view that is grounded in a contextualist perspective and emphasises the implications of pathways in historical time and place for human development and ageing' (Elder et al 2006 p4). In his study of children who grew up in the Great Depression, Elder was inspired by Karl Mannheim's 1928 essay, *On the Problem of Generation.* His aim was to examine how historical context and economic deprivation shaped individuals' lives as they unfolded (Elder 1999); and he showed how the wider context and the individual's life course intersected so that the effects of the Depression on individual deprivation were seen to depend on the point in the life course in which the individual experienced them.

From the late 1970s biographical methods became commonplace in social science and they have since diversified considerably. As Joanna Bornat (2008) suggests, biographical and narrative methods thrive on invention and have successfully entered the repertoires of those working in a variety of disciplines and fields of sociology, including the field of family studies.

Narrative analysis

Narrative approaches are generally seen as separate from the field of biographical research although it is all a question of degree. Driven to a greater extent by attention to language, symbolic representations and cultural forms, they go beyond conventional ideas of a story in that they encompass habitual narratives, topic-centred narratives and hypothetical narratives (Reissman 1993). Moreover, narrative analysis is not allied with any one method of data collection or analysis. There is only partial agreement about what constitutes narrative although most agree that it refers to an account of experiences and/or events that are connected in an ordered or arranged pattern, and that are constitutive of plot and structure. Like plays and novels, narratives are also characterised by dramatic devices. Story telling is the building block of narrative (Franzosi 1998).

The boundaries between narrative and life story are in practice often porous. Increasingly, fuelled by the ‘discursive turn’ in the social sciences, researchers’ attention is being paid to the contexts in which life stories and narratives are co-produced, to the occasioning of stories, and to stories as sites in which individuals perform and construct identities (Phoenix 2013). In analysing life stories there is an assumption that events and experiences do not reflect ‘actuality’ or at least that how they are remembered by the narrator may not reflect one single version of the ‘truth’. On the other hand, as Atkinson and Sampson (2019) show, each telling and retelling may contain more or less fixed episodes that become ‘sedimented’ or ‘crystallised’ in an interview account over time.

The methods employed to make sense of life stories depend upon the types of data. For example, biographical methods can equally be used in the analysis of variable-based survey data through attention to the events and social transitions in an interviewee’s life course, as they can be applied to qualitative material. As Elliott observes, statistical stories can be created by thinking ‘along cases rather than across them’ (p148). Such statistical narrative analysis can capture aggregate change while taking account of change at the individual level.

Qualitative methods depend heavily upon the interpretations of research participants although the researcher's role in interpretation is critical. Some qualitative biographical methods are more concerned with accuracy and the reliability of 'evidence'. As well as underpinning statistical research, such assumptions underlie oral history (Thompson 2017) that was founded on the idea of 'history-making', and the aim of putting on record the lives of those whose voices have been silenced or marginalised in 'official' history. Because of the 'political' aim of their work, oral historians employ methods of participatory engagement but they draw also on other sources of data in order to *verify* research participants' accounts. While many oral historians are eclectic in their methods, most adopt a directive stance, for example, using direct questions as a means of story elicitation rather than giving interviewees the freedom to organise their own stories. They draw upon *a priori* frameworks namely a life course perspective, and contextualise the lives of those they interview in time and space. (Bornat 2008).

By contrast, those who identify with a narrative tradition place greater importance upon an interpretive stance. They are less interested in the actual events and experiences that are narrated and give more attention to their meanings and the narrative form of the data. For these reasons biographies have increasingly been considered and examined as social constructs. Fritz Schütze has been credited with developing the biographical-interpretative method (1983), an interviewing and analysis method refined by Rosenthal (2004), whose contribution demonstrated the dialectical inter-relation between experience, memory and narration. These approaches were later adapted in the UK by Tom Wengraf in the biographic-narrative interpretive method (Wengraf 2001). This method was employed in two studies of multi- generation families that I have worked on (Brannen, Moss and Mooney 2004, Brannen 2015). Below I draw on an intergenerational study of fatherhood that employed an adapted version of the biographic-narrative interpretative approach (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001) in carrying out the interviews and in analysing the data.

Biographic-narrative interpretative approach (BNIM)

In our application of BNIM to a study of fatherhood we first carried out a life story approach that involved follow-up questions based on the life stories. To this we added a more conventional interview method that focused on the study's research questions concerning fatherhood.

In BNIM an initial question is posed to the interviewee that aims to provoke a life story. The first tenet of the approach is to treat the life story as a gestalt and to consider the genesis of its creation and construction. A second tenet is to identify the events and social transitions in interviewees' life course in the context of the periods in which they lived. A third tenet is to explore separately the perspective of the narrators in relation to different temporalities – their perspectives as they look back at the past from the vantage point of the present, and their re-collections of how they felt and viewed events at the time the events occurred. BNIM involves the initial codification of a life story into two parts: the 'lived life' and the 'told story' (Wengraf 2001). These distinctions are reflected in the first analysis of the interview in which 'lived life' and 'told story' are separately analysed.

The 'lived life' focuses attention on the shape and chronology of the life course - the timing and ordering of life events and social transitions, irrespective of how the individuals interpreted them. It thus enables analysts to open themselves to hypotheses concerning other life course directions the informants might have followed and the choices they might have made. The researcher is thereby forced to adopt a realistic stance by identifying the biographical data in the interview and also through documentary and historical material external to the interview. She or he is thereby cautioned against being 'over-persuaded and implicitly seduced by the interviewee and by their story-telling' (Wengraf & Chamberlayne, 2013, p.64).

The second step involves analysing the life story and considering it as a narrative. Stories are not histories. They are told with hindsight and recounted from the vantage point of the present and are shaped by and during the interview encounter (Schiff 2012). The 'told story' is understood as temporally unfolding in relation to the past, present and the future. Memory-based narratives of experiences and events relate to the past but refer also to the present and the future (Rosenthal 2004). Bruner's approach to narrative has many similarities in its emphasis on a 'historically-evolving' self. He writes, 'we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears of the future… resulting in the stories we tell about ourselves, our autobiographies' (Bruner, 2003, p. 210). A defining feature of the narrative-interpretative aspect of BNIM is the recognition therefore that there is no 'objective' past that is accessible through story-telling, an assumption shared by many narrative researchers (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008/13; Bamberg, 2006). As Polkinghorne (1988) comments, 'Research investigating the realm of meaning aims rather for verisimilitude, or results that have the appearance of truth or reality.' (p. 183).

An intergenerational lens in the study of families

Before going on to discuss the analysis of the research example I have chosen it is important to rehearse some aspects of an intergenerational research focus and its relevance for the study of family lives. A key point is that family generations are distinguished by their boundedness, while they are also integrated in a cross-generational succession and relationship (Lűscher and Hoff 2013). Each family generation interviewed is marked by the timing of its birth, by the life course phase at interview and by its historical experience. By looking at families intergenerationally we are alerted to differences in historical context and to the multitude of resources that are transmitted across generations. An intergenerational stance shows the dynamism and openness of transmission so that what is passed on only becomes a transmission when it is received by the next generation (Bertaux-Wiame 1993/2005) that makes its own mark upon what is passed on to it (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997). Transmission may produce generational breaks and ambivalences, as well as continuities. For example, when people migrate to a new country, an intergenerational focus can show which cultural resources migrants bring, those they act upon and transmit to younger generations, and which transmissions are rejected or not taken up by younger generations. As Mannheim (1952) suggests, as new generations come forward and old generations withdraw, new generations employ what Mannheim calls 'fresh contacts' as they engage with the social and cultural heritage of a given society. Ambivalences between generations may be enacted at different levels, for example, structurally, inter-personally and at the level of feelings (Nielsen 2016).

Grandfather and son: an intergenerational case study

As set out earlier, in the analysis of these data I adopt a realist position in setting lives in their historical and life course contexts, on the one hand, through the use of biographical methods. In addition, I employ a narrative approach in interpreting auto/biographical interviews as narrative accomplishments. The case I have selected is taken from an ESRC-funded study of three family generations of men – grandfathers, fathers and sons (Brannen 20145). Its aim was to understand changes in fatherhood across family generations including among men who had experienced migration[iii]. The case is that of an Irish migrant grandfather and his adult son who is also a father of a son (also interviewed). In this analysis I will first employ a biographical approach in the tradition of Elder (1999) among others, focussing on the life course trajectory of each man with attention to the historical contexts in which their lives unfolded, following the work of Mills (1980) and Mannheim (1952 [1928]). I will next go on to analyse the men's life stories as narratives and the ways in which their performance situated the self in ways that were not necessarily intended or self conscious (Bamberg 1997). In this sense what the narrator is saying is not understood as consciously hidden but in need of deciphering in analysis (Josselson 2004). By that I do not mean that researchers should impose an external interpretation upon a life story. Rather we examine the whole interview and the jigsaw of material that the interviewee recounts, paying attention to its performance and the silences in the account. The case will also identify auto/biographical interviews as a resource for understanding what family members pass on and the ways in which transmission is negotiated by the next generation.

Connor's and Murray's biographies

Connor was born in Ireland in 1933, the seventh child of seven sons. Both his parents died shortly after his birth. He spent much of early life in hospital because of suspected tuberculosis and then, following an accident in the hospital, he spent several years in a convalescent home. When he was fit enough to be discharged he was sent to one of Ireland's industrial schools. These institutions were set up in the mid 19th century to care for neglected and abandoned children and were intended to offer children practical training for employment. Aged 17 in 1950, Connor went to England and worked in a colliery. He soon returned to Ireland where he found work on a building site and went to night school to learn carpentry. Aged 25 he returned, this time to London. He continued to work in the construction sector and made his way up to the position of site foreman. Aged 27, he married an Irish woman (many Irish men of his generation did not marry) and the couple was granted a local authority flat. His three children were born in the 1960s/70s. At some point the family moved to a council house which, in the early Thatcher era (1980s), they were able to purchase under 'the right to buy' scheme. Connor extended the house drawing on out-of-hours labour from his workmates. He remained in construction for the rest of his life and at interview had recently retired.

Connor's son, Murray, had a very different life. Born in London in 1970, he went to the local Roman Catholic primary school and then to the local Catholic secondary school where his mother worked, first as a cleaner and later as its school secretary. Murray failed his GCSEs but retook exams in some subjects a year later. Aged 17, he left school. It was 1987 and Murray easily found a job in a finance company. Aged 19 in 1989, following a tip-off from a friend, he obtained a job as a clerk with a futures trader in the City of London. It was a period when the finance sector was booming. Within a year he was working on the floor of the London Stock Exchange and was moving in the high living world of City traders. Aged 27, he married a ‘non-Catholic’ and had three children. By 2000 trading was computerised. Murray was offered a trader job in New York but 7/11[iv] happened. By the mid 2000s the boom was over and Murray was no longer making money. The family was living off his savings. His wife took a full-time job and a friend of Murray's offered to back him financially to set up his own financial operation.

Comparing the biographies of father and son, we can see how they reflect the times in which they lived, especially their formative years, and the stark contrasts between the men. A key generational change is the upward mobility and affluence of the younger generation. The life of Connor, the grandfather, was marked by the harshness of life in Ireland in the first half on the twentieth century (that followed Ireland's fight for independence, a civil war and economic stagnation). Following his parents’ early deaths, Connor spent his childhood and youth in institutions. He lacked educational opportunities and, like many Irishmen of his generation, he migrated. His employment prospects in Britain, as they were for most Irishmen at that time, were limited to hard manual jobs in the booming construction sector. However, his children had access to free (selective) education and his family was housed by the local authority. During the Thatcher years he was able to buy his council house. By contrast, Murray enjoyed a family life in the affluent climate of 1980s London albeit his father was a manual worker. He had access to free education to secondary school level and gained a few qualifications; he entered the labour market at a time and place when the financial sector was booming and found work in the City of London. Murray's trajectory into the world of finance thereby represents both a rise and fall in fortunes: due to the rise of financial capitalism in the 1980s/1990s and its decline following the computerisation of finance and the banking crash in 2008. There are some similarities between the life course of father and son as well as contrasts: both were main breadwinners (Murray for the first years of being a father); both had three children (a sharp reduction in number compared with the generation before Connor) and both their wives attained white collar jobs. Both sent their children to Roman Catholic schools and brought them up as Catholics.

Connor's and Murray's life stories

The way informants begin their narratives is often significant. Some quickly indicate in their opening words that they have stories to tell. When this happens story telling is predicated on the interviewee *deciding* to adopt the narrative turn while the interviewer acts as a mere prompt or catalyst. It has been argued that a life story has the markers of a narrative when it contains the experience of a rupture or turning point. As Burgos wrote in the 1980s (unpublished paper), following Ricoeur (1985), the narrator who offers a story is seeking to make 'a coherent entity out of heterogeneous and often conflicting ideological positions, experiences, feelings, and events which create some kind of disjunction in the life. In that sense the narrator in their story is trying to "transcend" the rupture and to make sense of it herself.'

The Irish migrants we interviewed came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s and so looked back over more than 50 years in the UK and at a late point in the life course. Their stories focussed less on the 'functional present' (Mead 1932) and more on memories of the past. Typically they positioned themselves as survivors and in some cases as heroes in their own stories, as having struggled to overcome the obstacles in their paths as unskilled migrants in a hostile climate. Their stories in relation to fatherhood, the focus of the study, suggest considerable pride in having been the main breadwinner in their families, and in having managed to stay in a job throughout their working lives and not 'depend' on the state. They also displayed pride in having been able to have families of their own, given that many Irish of their generation did not marry. They took pride and satisfaction in being 'home owners'. These are the constitutive elements of what it meant to be a father for these men in the 1960s. Above all, they attributed 'success' to a driving commitment to hard work, a quality, they said, inherited from their fathers many of whom had struggled to make a subsistence living in Ireland in the troubled first half of twentieth century Ireland and had themselves been forced to migrate.

Connor was an exemplary raconteur. He employed the emplotment of time (Ricoeur 1985) to tell a dramatic story. His opening narrative presaged what was to follow. Connor recounted his life as a set of turning points that he neatly condensed. His early life in poverty-stricken 1930s Ireland was one of great misfortune; it is emblematic and heroic, the stuff of Irish fiction.

And the dad (his dad) went to America and then came back …, I was the seventh son. … I'm the last of them by the way. But anyway, father and mother died when I was only 2, …And the mother said like you know 'I won't be dead a year, and he'll be behind me' like you know. Which he was. .. Well anyway … (pause) I didn't know them like you know what I mean, so I don't (pause) in fairness to everybody else like – I didn't miss my mum and dad because I didn't know them. So how can you miss your mum and dad, you know? But you know when *you're a baby everybody likes to pick you up, don't they? …Well I'm getting to the story, but everybody likes to pick you up. Well I didn't know this till years and years and years after that what happened to me was (pause) one of the nurses picked me up and let me fall… Yeah, let me fall and broke my back.*

In this narrative there are strong elements of performativity in the way Connor told his story with an audience in mind. Connor sought to foreshadow a sense of inevitability about the misfortune of his father's death in his quotation of his mother's words; '*I won't be dead a year, and he'll be behind me*'. He then built up to the climax of his story, drawing the audience in, setting a scene of seeming normality – *'when you're a baby everybody likes to pick you up, don't they?*' before coming to the 'crisis' in the story ('*Well I'm getting to the story'*) when a nurse picked him up and dropped him, breaking his back. What is also clear from the start of his narrative is that Connor was appealing to his audience in suggesting that, despite the apparent enormity of losing both parents so young, this misfortune can be overcome, '*I didn't miss my mum and dad because I didn't know them. So how can you miss your mum and dad, you know?'* He then further downplayed the loss of his parents in the rhetorical question '*How can you miss your mum and dad?'* Despite the recent adverse publicity given to industrial schools in Ireland where he spent most of his youth, from his current vantage point Connor minimised the effects of this experience, notably stressing that he was not subject to any sexual abuse, which is now known to have been widespread in these institutions.

Connor employed considerable narrative skill in telling his story and in the selections he made in the interview. Furthermore, Connor's positive gloss on his unfortunate early life is suggestive of a 'break' or turning point. In Turner's terms (Turner 1974) this is a phase of redressive action which follows a state of liminality that contains the germ of future developments in which an individual turned his life around. The upward turn in Connor's life course trajectory took place after his second migration to Britain when he was offered a promotion to site foreman in a large building firm. Thus in the way that Connor told his story the goodness of the present is magnified against the misfortune and poverty of the past (McAdam 1993 p104). Connor's description of being given a company car on his promotion is metonymic, symbolising or standing for the sense of pride Connor took in the enhanced status his new position bestowed, both at the time and in the interview. Again, success is made vivid through the re-enactment of the moment as he employed direct speech.

So I said (pause) 'well that was a big job for me' and it meant I could get a company car then you see. (Oh) I said 'This is great' … it was a big company like. Gs was the name of them.., and then I went from them to a proper really big crowd, you know – it was in the '50s. And then I said to (wife), I said 'You can have a go at this now' I said 'with this car' I said – it was only an Escort you know. Because when you're higher than a general foreman you get a bigger car… So of course naturally, what did I do? – I got higher. So I run the job then like you know, I was just sitting behind a desk and everybody would come in 'Could I see Mr …' you know whoever it is, and I felt (pause) I felt great….But anyway, I never looked back, I really never looked back from then on. I carried on and carried on.

The transformative aspects of Connor's story are present later in the interview when the interviewer asked him whether he experienced any discrimination when he first came to England. In response Connor again used a narrative voice employing 'small stories' (Bamberg 2006). While acknowledging the existence of overt discrimination towards Irish people in general, Connor was reluctant to admit to discrimination, exempting himself on account of his status - his power to hire and fire personnel. In this next quotation we see that when asked about his ethnic identification he drew on the resources of both his family's history and Ireland's colonised past - claiming that members of his family had fought for Britain in two world wars. Thus he sought to construct a multi-faceted ethnic identity integrating his identification with both Ireland and Britain; in looking back from the present vantage point (a ‘successful life’), Connor exercised strategies of resistance by which he was able to distance himself from the experiences of other Irish migrants whose biographies may be deemed less 'successful'.

I’m saying, ‘I’m Irish, but my people were British Army’, and I was delighted. I love Britain, to be honest with you I love Britain, and I’ve never run down Britain – I would never run down Britain. My second home don’t forget – you know what I mean? I’ve got nothing against – they gave me anything I wanted like you know – and that’s exactly I mean. I have no compunctions about any of the, what the Brits are – you will get the ignorant type that say ‘Oh they shouldn’t be in this country’ – but now they don’t, but at that time they did. At that time they definitely did. But you must remember now, you’ve got to remember this what I’m saying now – I was in a position on a job that no one would say anything to me, otherwise I’d get rid of them – you know what I mean?

It is therefore clear from Connor’s narratives that what is also important in determining the ways in which Connor engaged with the narrative mode at interview were his *current* purposes of telling his story. Undoubtedly, Connor's stories have been rehearsed, refreshed and modified over the years. However, they also reflect key turning points that are sedimented into his claims for having made a success of his life, despite the misfortunes of its beginnings. The self-conscious manner of this 'presentation of self' is confirmed at the end of his interview when Connor offered a summation of his life, calling on the interviewer to affirm that he had, after all, made a success of it, ‘*I think I’ve gone from the top to the bottom like you know. Really and truly, I think I’ve done well for you today anyway like. At least you can put something down now can’t you?’* In short, Connor’s narrative demonstrates how identity is constructed and meaning made from the key turning points in his life over time and during the course of an interview.

Given the focus of the study was on fatherhood, what Connor does *not* choose to elaborate on in his life story is significant. In his life story his focus on the world of work is a 'default account' of fatherhood. As we have suggested elsewhere, the concepts employed to denote fatherhood and fathering as practice are themselves subject to change as well as changes in men's practices and understandings (Brannen and Nilsen 2006). That Connor did not elaborate on fatherhood as care does not mean that fatherhood was not a central part of his life. Under questioning about his fathering practices in the follow-up interview it transpired that Connor worked exceptionally long hours including Saturdays and Sundays when his children were young. He regarded fatherhood as being about '*bringing in the money'* and '*making sure there's plenty on the table*.' His relatively brief responses to questions about his involvement with his children suggest fathering practices that were widespread for the time especially with sons – playing football with them and taking them to matches. On the other hand, he offered a reflective response to a question about whether there was anyone he could think of who had acted as a role model for fatherhood; his response says a great deal about his own lack of a family life when he was young,

I didn't get a chance you see, cos I was in school, I was in hospital, I was in a convalescent – and then I went to [the industrial school]. I didn't get the chance to realise what a dad'd be like you see. That's what it boils down to you know. So I couldn't tell you exactly what I'd like to be – what a dad should be like, you know what I mean?

Connor's performativity and narrative skill were reflected in his son's different story but one that was similar in that he too presented his life as 'successful'. The kernel of Murray's life story and identity is life as a playground. Murray reflected at some length in his opening narrative on his own childhood, *'it was just all play, everything was fun. Because you were free, we were just free to do anything'.* Just as Connor's opening narrative was a portent of what was to come, so Murray's story began with a similarly arresting beginning that resonated throughout his interview. After a reference to his birth, he turned to his childhood – growing up in 1970s London, a time of slum clearance when a new city was beginning to emerge. He conjured up the 'bomb site' where he spent his childhood, calling it 'an extended playground’.

…it was a derelict factory. .. that was our playground for when I was growing up. It was just a complete (pause) it was like a bomb site … all the houses in the area were all being (pause) you know the council were taking them to be rebuilt… Then that became (pause) ..it became an extended playground – …I wouldn’t let my kids go near them now.

Like his father’s life story, Murray’s focused largely on the world of work, with little mention of ‘fathering’ in the sense of caring for and relating to this children, except in response to direct interview questions. The central motif of Murray’s narrative was about having 'fun’. Murray recounted in detail the pranks that he and his workmates got up to in his first job in an insurance company, described as 'one long jolly'. For Murray working in the City was about making money *without* the hard work evident in his father's life. Indeed, he stressed that he had rejected his father's attempts to pass on a strong work ethic. Rather he said he was attracted by the people working in the City because they seemed to be having such a 'really good time'.

I mean dad would never (pause) he would never miss a day’s work in his life. You know they all had (pause) well I think that they all had that sort of mentality that ... you were lucky to have a job in the first place, and you know because you’ve got a job you worked for it – and my dad certainly did. Whereas I didn’t (pause) well I sort of did and I didn’t. I know that ... you get what you put into things, but (pause) yeah I just didn’t. I don’t know what drew me more into [finance and the City]. *I think ... it was the sort of people who were doing it – although you know they were a little bit educated and that, but they just seemed to be having* *a really good time and (pause) and of course Wall Street*[v] *came out sort of you know about a year or so later. I thought 'well I definitely (pause) definitely want to get into that'.*

Like his father, Murray drew on metonyms to convey success. Later in his interview he provided a 'small story' in his description of the trading floor of the Stock Exchange. He returned to the central motif of his interview - life as a playground,

…we had like 300 guys, there was very few women down there, so the place was like a playground, you know, it really was. So I'd literally (pause) you know my previous job was just messing around, I'd gone to another playground, you know, but just on a bigger scale. And all it was, was just grown men … you know not the kids … this was grown men who were doing all the silly things… it was a big playground again, and that was where I was at home.

However, key aspects of transmission were evident in the stories of father and son. Murray said he strongly identified with his father as the archetypal sociable Irishman. As he said, '*I'm nothing without him'*. He then went on to describe his father's ability to network, a characteristic that Murray adapted to his own advantage, '*I am – I do (pause) I meet who I want to meet and I get everyone, and I do pull a lot of people in the same way that he does. He does it fantastically... (pause) I surround myself with the right people, whereas he tends to surround himself with everyone.'*

Murray's presentation of himself in relation to fatherhood was both similar to and different from Connor's. Despite the passage of time both recounted life stories that focussed on the their role as family breadwinners and the world of work. However, unlike his father's motivation to work hard, Murray's own motivation was unequivocally about making money without working hard. As Murray said, '*it has to be money. Money for (pause) you know cos I want everything for the family'*. But their interpretations of what money was 'for' are similar.

In terms of fathering practices, it was clear from responses to interview questions they differed at the time when Murray was no longer working as a City trader and he was able to get home from work earlier. From focussed questions we learn that he was involved about his involvement with his children; he mentioned taking the children to school and looking after them two evenings a week. He also talked about showing his love for his children. His remarks about his own experiences of being parented as a child suggest how his own current fathering practices differed from those of his parents when he was young, '*we were sort of (pause) don't know, weren't really central to their social life. Yeah, we could just be fitted in'*. By contrast with his parents, Murray and his wife organised their leisure around their children. On the other hand, Murray expressed regret that his children lacked the freedom that his parents gave him as a child, even though as a father today he said he would not allow them to roam free in the neighbourhood as he used to do.

Thus Murray's life story and responses to direct questions about fatherhood suggest that his identity is complex and multi-faceted. He sought to reconcile his present and his future self with different aspects of his past – his Irish ancestry and his relationship with his father as well as defending the choices he made in creating his own very different path in employment and fatherhood in Britain the late 1990s and early 21st century.

This case of a father and son have given, I hope, some sense of how a biographical perspective and a narrative approach, when they are applied to an intergenerational study, provide a 'thick description' of the multiple dimensions that create continuity and change across generations in relation to fatherhood and other social domains, and the ways in which subjectivities are made in different eras and contexts – Murray's in 1990s London and Connor's in the mid 20th century world of Irish migration. It also points to some of the more invisible processes of transmission that take place in families. In this case Connor was unable to transmit to his son the strong work ethic that he had lived by. Murray for his part had taken on some of the personal qualities and interpersonal skills of his Irish father. The two men are also similar in that both interpreted fatherhood as being about ‘bringing in the money’, although in recent years, as Murray’s working hours have lessened and his wife taken a full-time job, a more involved type of fathering practice has assumed greater significance. In particular, reflecting the way intimacy has become the central motif of modern family life, Murray talked about the importance of showing affection to his children. The case also shows how parents negotiated with their adult children and managed intergenerational inequalities resulting from Connor's migration history and the differences created by the upward mobility of the succeeding generation.

Conclusion

Auto/biographies are based on subjectivity but lives are situated in time and place. This latter aspect requires researchers to engage in contextualisation: to place lives in historical perspective and not to be overly reliant on informant testimony. As Hammersley (1989) argues, research participants are not necessarily best placed to define, or even adequately know fully, the contexts in which they live. One of the ways I have discussed in the chapter for the analysis of life story data is the biographic-narrative interpretive method (BNIM). This method separates out in the initial analysis the events and life course transitions from the interviewee’s interpretations, thereby enabling the researcher to look at the features of an individual’s life trajectory in relation to other similar cases and in relation to the societies in which they lived. Filling in the broader historical contexts of informants’ lives is an important part of the process of contextualization which involves researching a wide literature concerning the lives and times of those under study and comparing and interrogating the life trajectories of informants with other cases.

Life stories as narratives are generated when people are explicitly invited to tell them and given the space to do so. It is important, however, to note that many interviewees do not necessarily take up the narrative mode (Brannen 2013), in which case contextualisation as a research practice comes into its own. Life story telling is often provoked by ‘having a story to tell’ – often related to a turning point, or rupture of canonical expectations (Reissman 2008) that the narrator is seeking to ‘transcend’. In both the interviews discussed the stories turn on key turning points in the life course that were germane to the men’s re-presentations of their lives as ‘successful’. In Connor's narrative he built towards the climax of his childhood misfortunes in a way that intimated that a turning point was to follow bringing repair and redemption. In Murray's case he began with, and returned to, the central trope of his life - the idea of life as a playground - a narrative that began with childhood and returned in his account of his good fortune in becoming a City trader.

As described the context on which these life stories were elicited was a study of fatherhood. In the life stories of Connor, fatherhood as understood in contemporary ‘care discourses’ was absent, although this changed for Murray. Fatherhood was not absent from their stories; it was present in both men’s strong orientations to their work and to breadwinning that kept them (and the father generations before them) away from their children and their homes. In Connor’s case, fatherhood took on another form of ‘absent presence’ in his story about growing up with no father figures in his life. Apparent silences on the part of the men about fatherhood may therefore be misinterpreted if fatherhood is seen as peripheral to men’s identities and reflects the ways in which fatherhood is conceptualised. Further, as the follow-up interviews we carried out with the men showed, men did have relevant things to say about fatherhood when asked specific questions. BNIM and similar life story methods need therefore to be supplemented by more conventional forms of interviewing if they are to address a study’s research questions.

The chapter has shown that the analysis of life story interviews affords insight into the resources that men drew upon and transmitted. Here we see ‘echoes of the past’ (Smart 2007 p543) in the way both men displayed their considerable story telling skills and other resources that passed down the generations. This was affirmed by Murray when he suggested he had inherited his fathers’ considerable social networking competencies. Both men employed dramatic devices and performativity in how they engaged with their audience.

Both men’s stories are similar in their current representations of their lives as ‘successful’ even though the canons of success differ; for Connor, an Irish migrant in the 1950s, success meant never being out of a job and his elevation to site foreman, while for Murray it was about making money in the heady days of the London Stock Exchange in the 1990s. However, stories tell us not only about how informants experienced, and continue to experience, the past, they also tell us how they see and experience the present and how they envision their lives in the future. Yet Connor’s redemptive story - rising above early misfortune through a mix of hard work and luck and Murray's account of his life as a playboy - are more than a positive gloss, they are ways of living. Memories are not mirrors that reflect the past. They are subject to restoration, refracted through contemporary time frames and lenses that are shaped by a multiplicity of factors to do with subjectivities, the nature of researchers' questions, the particular research method employed, the cultural resources and repertoires of the teller, the structure of the life course and its crises and turning points, the wider historical context, and the societal canons concerning what ‘success’ means. Researchers’ interpretations in understanding the meanings that stories have for individuals are also temporal and reflect our own vantage points.

Life stories that combine biographical and narrative approaches suggest the complex interplay between the way people speak about their experiences and the structures against which such talk needs to be understood (McCleod and Thomson, 2009). This requires both the art of re-presentation and rigorous analysis. It requires the researcher to bring together the critical elements of a life in a convincing and rigorous way to make an argument or to offer an explanation; to identify presences and omissions; to develop disciplined systematic analyses of how biographies are produced, shared and transmitted. Such endeavours are more likely to produce a rich and multi-layered analysis. This is a difficult feat as Bertaux observes, ‘It takes some training to hear, behind the solo of a human voice, the music of society and culture in the background’ (Bertaux 1990, pp. 167-168). However, as those writing about the genre of literary biography recognise, there is no one method of doing this (Lee 2009 18).

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[i] See Nilsen and Brannen 2011). Volumes I and II in the original edition concern the peasant primary groups in Poland and their experiences of the rapid industrialisation at home and rising rates of migration to America and Germany. Volume III is an autobiography of an immigrant of peasant origin (Wladek). Volume IV is about the development and reorganisation of peasant communities in Poland under the new regimes of agriculture and modernisation, and Volume V explores the situation

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of Polish immigrants in the Chicago area, and the disorganisation of communities in their new surroundings. There is also a long Methodological Note in the original Volume I, that Thomas explained later was written after the study had been completed (Blumer 1979, p. 83).

[ii] Members of the Chicago School were associated with Hull House, a social settlement founded by Jane Adams.

[iii] The ESRC study (2010-2012) sought to examine how different generations and 'ethnicities' engaged in fathering and the experience of being fathered; how migration influenced fatherhood; and the processes by which fathering was transmitted. Three generational chains of men were selected from London and Southern England; eight chains of first generation Polish (migrant) fathers, their fathers (living in Poland), and their sons (plus two chains of second generation Polish fathers); ten chains of second generation Irish fathers, their fathers (born in Ireland) and their sons; ten chains of white British fathers, their fathers (born in the UK) and their sons who had no history of migration in recent generations in their families. The youngest generation was aged 5-18.

Each generation gave their informed consent to being part of the study and understood clearly that they and other family members would be likely to recognise themselves in the publications. Pseudonyms have been used and other names and places changed or omitted.

[iv] The bombing of the twin towers in New York.

[v] He is probably referring to Wall Street, the 1987 American movie.