

Review:

*Mike Wrigley*

**Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat & Tom Wengraf (Eds.) (2000). *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*. London: Routledge, 368 pages, ISBN 0-415-22838-7 (pbk) £17.99**

**Key words:** social research, biographical research, narrative

**Abstract:** This is a book which will be of use to anyone who either wants to know the breadth of the uses to which biographical research can be, and has been, put. The editors have gathered together a number of internationally renowned biographical researchers and theorists to give examples of their research using such methods. It is well-written, easy to read, and is essential reading for all those wishing to pursue such research themselves. The examples are mainly from a West European, particularly German, perspective but this does not detract from their utility in other contexts. For those with a theoretical or practical interest in the breadth of biographically grounded research, then this book will provide much food for thought. For others, it will provide an exciting look into the world of biographical work and its wide possibilities. It deserves its place in the Routledge Social Research Today series of texts.

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### 1. General Context

The editors of *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* have gathered together a number of internationally renowned researchers and theorists in the field of biographical methods. This is a book which encompasses the cutting edge of the field in question and is recommended for anyone attempting to engage with either the theoretical underpinnings or research within its parameters, or both. It is part of the Social Research Today series of texts. [1]

As its title suggests, the book focuses on the increasing use and development of biographies, personal accounts, narratives and so on within the purview of social science theory and research. This is, in effect, re-emphasizing the place of the personal and the social within social science as a whole. The editors claim that the "biographical turn" represents a paradigm shift (KUHN, 1960) within the whole range of social science disciplines. This is a huge claim to make, and is clearly

open to debate. However, this is not to detract from the foundations of this book which is an excellent introduction to the field. [2]

The book itself is divided into two parts, the first being devoted to the theoretical underpinnings and grounding of the methodology and methods. The second half is given over to a series of case studies which exemplify some of the theoretical background points made. [3]

## **2. Theory and Methodology**

The first part, representing about a third of the book, is given over to discussion of the theoretical basis of this "turn to biographical methods," and begins with a significant contribution from RUSTIN, who reflects on the historical development of the rise of "individuals" within social science research and how the "biographical turn" has evolved. Following this there are chapters devoted to other aspects of the theoretical field such as biographical analysis, life story approaches, and clinical hermeneutics. FISCHER-ROSENTHAL, a key theorist in the use of biographical approaches, develops his theme of the relationship between the individual biography and life story and the social structuring of society, although he does make clear that he avoids the subject-object, structure-agency type of dualism that is prevalent within contemporary reasoning. In doing so, he outlines his theory of biographical structuring, which he refers to as "'biography' (individual) and 'biographical patterns' (institutions)" (p.114), loosely equivalent to GIDDENS' (1984) notion of structuration. [4]

## **3. Biographical Methods in Use**

This second part of the book is where the theoretical aspects explored in the first section are put into practice. There is a plethora of examples of the variety of applications to which biographical research has been put. However, five of the eleven chapters are devoted to issues related to Germany, though that in no way detracts from the detail and utility of the content of these chapters. It does, nevertheless, bring to mind the question of whether the "biographical turn" to which the editors make reference is sufficiently broad. Biographical theories do have their origins in Continental European philosophical theory rather than Anglo-American, so it might be expected that the largest set of examples would be from these areas. [5]

Although the focus of these chapters might be on German social policy and the individual responses to things such as reunification, the ways in which the chapters are written lend themselves to a wide range of potential applications in other areas. In most of them the context is German, but the arguments are much broader. For example, SCHIEBEL discusses the biographies of "West German youth" in terms of the integration of extreme right-wing political attitudes. Whilst the historico-cultural background of Nazism is incorporated here, as one would expect, the implications that SCHIEBEL draws do lend themselves to discussion and examination of attitudes amongst many groups of people, both within and without Germany. [6]

Other chapters in this section cover a wide range of situations and contexts. SQUIRE looks at the way in which people with HIV demonstrate different narrative structures and genres and the impact the HIV status has on identity formation. This makes an interesting comparison to Michele CROSSLEY's (e.g. 2000) work on the same issues. [7]

HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON discuss the psychological impact of locality within the narratives of people, focusing on two specific women to illustrate their points, and in particular discuss how the effect of living within a community with a high crime rate affects a person's understanding of self and the nature of anxiety. [8]

Other chapters are equally wide-ranging in their approach to the application of biographical approaches in research. These include exploring the changing nature of identity for people with learning difficulties, understanding how carers come to terms with looking after someone close to them. How older people come to terms with the changing nature of their community and environment is also explored. [9]

Thus, there is a range of contextual situations which are used as a backdrop to understanding the place which biographical research can have within social policy, and the caring services and agencies. It is often practice-based, thus lending itself well to evidence-based practice currently in vogue, particularly in the UK. [10]

#### **4. Critique**

The book is indeed a study in the theory and performance of biographical research as it is currently engaged. It is a delight to read. That it deserves a place in the series by Routledge I think is without question. The chapters are easy to read and clear in their analysis, both theoretical and practical. The reader is left in no doubt that the contributors are leaders in their particular field. [11]

In terms of the niche which is biographical theory and research, this is an excellent book. However, whether the claim of a "turn" to biographical methods in social sciences generally is well-founded, I am not sure. Certainly, there has been an upsurge in the amount of research within social science which focuses on individual aspects as opposed to a more structural analysis, but whether this constitutes a "turn" remains to be seen. The implication is that a "turn" refers to a turn towards something and therefore a turn away from something else (that is, from structural analyses to biographical ones). This is not really evidenced by the contributors here. Quite rightly, that was not the aim of the book. [12]

I would have liked to see a broader series of articles rather than the focus on (largely) West European policy contexts. But there is much that readers can take from this book. For those with a theoretical or practical interest in the breadth of biographically grounded research, then this book will provide much food for thought. For others, it will provide an exciting look into the world of biographical work and its wide possibilities. [13]

## References

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## Author

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