Life Story Talk: Some Reflections on Narrative in Qualitative Interviews

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Abstract

The paper draws on the author's interview experiences and interrogates the conditions in which research interviews generate narratives and storytelling; interviews that do not invite storytelling and interviews where people were asked to give a life story. First, the paper considers the question as to what provokes storytelling. It suggests that people engage with the narrative mode to some extent under the conditions of their own choosing. Second, it examines the processes by which meaning is achieved in storytelling and made sense of by the research analyst. Contrasting two cases of Irish migrants, drawn from a study of fatherhood across three generations in Polish, Irish and white British families, the paper then considers issues of analysis. The argument is made that sociological qualitative research has to engage with narrative analysis and that this involves a close examination not only of what is told and not told but also the forms in which stories are told (the structuring of stories and their linguistic nuances), and the methods by which the interviewee draws in and persuades the listener. Lastly and most importantly, the paper concludes that attention should be made to talk and context in equal measure. It considers the importance of contextualisation of interview data contemporaneously and historically and the methodological strategies through which the researchers create second order narratives in the analysis of their research.

Keywords: *Research Interview, Life Story, Narrative, Performativity, Contextualisation, Biographical Methods*

Paper

1.1 Beginning with some reflections on some of my own experiences of interviewing, in which there was no explicit invitation to tell a story, the paper considers the ways in which, and the conditions in which, semi-structured interviews generate narrative talk. The paper then goes on to examine some research in which interviewees were explicitly invited to narrate their life stories. A case is examined in which an informant engaged with a life story mode of talk; some of the aspects that constitute its narrative form are considered, in particular performativity. This case is then contrasted with one in which the informant did not engage in telling a life story despite an invitation to do so. The paper argues that in qualitative research it is not possible to escape from narrative analysis and that this involves a close examination of what is tellable and not tellable, the cultural forms in which stories are told and the need to contextualise stories in relation to the times and places in which they are situated (contemporaneously and historically) and in relation to the people to whom stories are told. The paper considers the importance of the contextualisation of narrative talk and interview data and the methodological strategies through which the researchers created second order narratives in the analysis of their research. Before doing this the paper briefly outlines some of the debates in narrative research before outlining some of its characteristics.

Introduction

2.1 Interest in narrative research is nothing new. It has been subject to many approaches and debates. From the vantage point of the 1930s and a search for truth there was a questioning of the validity of life story research and biographical methods in the wake of the significant study *The Polish Peasant* in the 1930s (Nilsen & Brannen 2011). More recently debates have centred around the privileging of narrative data over other forms of data. In the field of illness, Paul Atkinson (1997) has criticised some North American narrative specialists on epistemological grounds for attributing authenticity and validity to

narrative data in ways that speak to and celebrate the self as a reflexive project and prioritise 'voice'. Atkinson has also entered the contest between ethics and methodology in particular questioning a simplistic tendency on the part of some researchers to treat the narrative form as empowering and as having recuperative benefits for interviewees. Responding to this, Carol Thomas (2010) has argued in favour of a mutual interplay between ethics and scholarship; in the field of health and illness, as a way of engaging in a 'public sociology' her view seems to be that researchers should employ participatory research methods with patients who tell their stories. At the same time, Thomas finds common ground with Atkinson in emphasising the constructedness of stories, their situation within material social contexts and the importance of methodological rigour and 'methodological skepticism as we would apply to any other acts and social forms' (Atkinson 1997: 341).

2.2 The term narrative employed here denotes a particular form, namely the activity of narrating or telling a life story. As Schiff (2012) argues, one of the main functions of narrating is to 'make present' life experience and interpret a life in particular times and places. Following Atkinson (2005), life stories should not be treated as only personal, they have generic properties that reflect shared cultural conventions (Atkinson 2005). Narrators do not discover the rules of narrative for themselves but follow some kind of model suited to their aims, albeit they are not cogniscent of the narrative frames they are using.

2.3 Life stories in particular are typically created vertically through time that involves chronologies or sequences of events that are linked together, even if causality is not made explicit by the narrator (Elliott 2005). Stories are, however, more than chronicles of events, they involve evaluations in which the narrator conveys to the audience the meanings intended in the telling of events (Elliott 2005). Narrative speech typically involves recounting past events as if they were happening in the present. However it is not pure; interviewees typically intersperse narrative in this strict sense with argumentation and evaluation which are recounted from present time perspectives and with hindsight (Freeman 2010).

2.4 Life stories provide holistic and processual accounts both through the concept of the life trajectory and the hermeneutic aspects of the life. Life story telling is a social performance embedded in 'interpretative understandings of biographically unfolding subjectivity' (Atkinson 2005, 2009). While narrative speech is part and parcel of everyday speech in which one may choose to tell or not tell, it depends on an audience. It constitutes a form of social action performed in the research encounter (Atkinson 2005).

2.5 Narratives are structured. Like stories in books and plays, they have plots with both temporal and spatial features (Abbott 1997). They are created horizontally through the juxtaposition of the self with others (Edgar 2009). They involve beginnings, middles and ends. Narrative structure organises the interpretations that an audience as well as the teller imposes on the events, persons and places that constitute the plot. As many writers on narrative have set out (e.g. Riessman 2008; Gubrium & Holstein 2009; Andrews et al. 2009), some of the markers that go with narrative talk include the use of direct quotation of speech as if the characters are on a stage and 'the production of closed significant anecdotes... considered as linguistic and narrative marks of the process of fictionalisation' (Burgos unpublished).

2.6 Since life stories are typically 'conventionalised narrative expressions of life experiences' enacted in accordance with structured conventions of narrative and performative genres (Denzin 1989), they require listeners and presuppose an audience. They therefore involve performativity (Reissman 2008). For while story tellers have privileged access to the floor, they must ensure the audience stays engaged. Narrators clarify what they believe the audiences need to know in order to understand the story and place limits on what they say. They deploy strategies to re-enact the past as if they and their audiences were present at that time, for example by deploying emphasis, repetition and direct appeals to the audience's attention and judgment. Narrators may employ dramatic techniques of metaphor and metonymy to convey meaning with attention paid to aesthetics and emotions (e.g. Denzin 1997: 96).

2.7 Life stories are mediated through memory and as Antze (1996) observes, memories are monuments that we visit but they are also 'ruins' which are subject to restoration. Life stories generate an unfolding past into which the actors are situated and situate themselves in the present. They are retrospective accounts of decisions, actions and events, often relating to distant periods of the life course, and located in particular contexts, situations, relationships and moral judgments pertaining to these. While people's recall of the past falters, their evaluations of decisions and events are made with reference to present time frames. It is, in practice, impossible for the raconteur to stand outside the present when considering the past (Brannen et al. 2004: 84).

2.8 Life stories told to researchers are, like all accounts, partial. They are shaped by the researcher's interests and their questions, by interviewees as they take these and their own interests into account, and by the research encounter itself. The analysis of life story narratives resembles the activity of the biographer (Oakley 2010). According to Hermione Lee (2009) biographers carry out autopsies on their 'subjects', leaving no bone undisturbed, albeit not all bones can be disinterred. Biographers also act like detectives; ontologically speaking they search after facts adhering to a realist approach, aiming to create a picture of a whole life or at least everything considered relevant. In addition they are concerned to identify all their sources; they act like historians linking their subjects to the ages in which their 'subjects' have lived their lives. Biographers, like autobiographers, also focus on subjectivity and engage with and re-present the self. In the stories they create from their investigations they may also make explicit to a greater or lesser extent their own subjectivity about their subjects. Just as the selections that people make from their lives are often telling, so too are the choices that researchers make in selecting a particular case or life course phase for analysis. As Rosenthal says 'it is by no means coincidental or insignificant when biographers argue about one phase of their lives but narrate another at great length, and then give only a brief report of yet another part of their lives...' (1998: 4-5).

Narrative talk generated in qualitative interviews

3.1 Narrative talk can be elicited spontaneously and unexpectedly and may even go against the grain of what the researcher requires from an interview, as those writing about interviewing point out (Arksey & Knight 1999; Michael 2012). On the other hand, narrative may be deliberately solicited by particular research topics and/or interview methods. I will refer first to a study that did not set out to generate narrative talk. In the 1980s I was employed on a Medical Research Council funded investigation into the mental health of a working class community sample of mothers with a child at home drawn from the lists of patients on general practice registers in the London borough of Islington in the early 1980s (Brown 2002). Longitudinal in design, it set out to examine the conditions that preceded and brought about clinical depression in mothers, in particular through an exploration of the life events and difficulties that preceded depression onset and the contextual resources and constraints of the women's lives. The interview method involved a lengthy semi-structured interview schedule that covered many aspects of women's personal and inter personal lives.

3.2 In the course of this fieldwork, I became more aware of the different ways in which people respond to the questions put to them and attentive to the conditions in which interviewees engaged spontaneously with a narrative mode. As part of a four hour interview we were required to begin with a lengthy psychiatric research instrument (the Present State Examination or PSE) in which interviewees were asked whether, over what periods and for how long they had experienced a range of imaginable and unimaginable psychiatric symptoms. The study was not concerned with eliciting women's understandings of the origins of their symptoms but with assessing their mental health and with rating the degree of threat of life events and difficulties they had encountered. The interviews were never fully transcribed and the stories were lost and, sadly, also largely forgotten.

3.3 What struck me then and has stayed with me some thirty years on is how conventional semi-structured interviews were sometimes occasions for research participants to break the rules of the 'question and answer' format. In this study engagement with a narrative mode typically occurred in response to specific questions posed in the PSE. Decontextualised questions, which even the most seasoned of researchers would flinch from asking, often provoked stories about people's lives and did indeed provide insight into the specific genesis of a mental illness. In one case my memory was overlaid by the shock I experienced when, at my first interview using the PSE I asked 'Do you ever feel like you are falling off the edge of the universe?' This question provoked the young working class black mother in question to recount a lengthy story about her life. ^[1]

3.4 Another interview also comes to mind in which a woman shortly into PSE section of the interview embarked on a long story about her marriage, recounting how she was suffocating emotionally from an overly dependent relationship. In the course of her lengthy narrative the room grew dark and a severe storm blew up outside of which the woman seemed entirely oblivious. After three hours she brought the interview abruptly to an end; she expected her husband home and did not want him to know of my visit.

3.5 Thus I came to realise that interview questions can act as hooks upon which people choose to hang their stories. Undoubtedly I may have appeared receptive to women's own explanations for how they came to experience symptoms and feelings, conveying this interest in unspoken ways. In addition I have since wondered whether my way of selling the study shaped women's responses. Contrary to instructions I used to say that we wanted to hear what it was like to be living through the early 1980s, the time of Thatcher's Britain. However this would not explain why some women launched into a narrative mode while others did not.

3.6 I also began to notice that the timing women selected to be interviewed was sometimes significant in terms of their readiness to tell their stories. One instance I can recall very clearly. After a number of phone calls to set a date convenient for the interviewee, we agreed a time and day. On my arrival the woman announced that this was a propitious moment to be interviewed. I cannot remember the order in which she gave her explanations but they went something like this, '*I have bought a dog, dyed my hair and got rid of my husband*'. Clearly the readiness of this woman to be interviewed at that moment was prompted by a life course transition.

3.7 Contrary to Denzin who suggested that as researchers we *seek out* the stories people tell one another 'as they attempt to make sense of the epiphanies or existential turning point moment in their lives' (Denzin 1997: 92), I seemed to happen upon them. Story telling was prefaced as it were by the interviewee's decision and reason to adopt the narrative turn.

3.8 When I moved to a new study interviewing women with a more varied social class profile, the occasions on which interviewees launched into long narrative accounts of their experiences happened less often. I began to realise that the interviewee's engagement with a life story mode within the context of a semi-structured interview was not only variable and unpredictable but that these rich narrative data form part of a broader frame of agentic choosing related to a range of factors; the interview encounter, life course transitions and ruptures, and the tellability of their stories in relation to historical and geographical location.

3.9 As those analysing qualitative research and narrative form emphasise, the interview is a collaborative venture (Gubrium & Holstein 2009) or a co-construction (Riessman 2008). When the interviewer issues an interviewee with what Martine Burgos (1988, unpublished) terms 'the inaugural request' to tell a life story, this not only beckons the interviewee into the narrative mode it also legitimates it.

3.10 However, not everyone responds to that request and, as I have already discussed, interview talk can

take a narrative turn in a conventional semi-structured interview. Burgos notes that when she sought explicitly to elicit a life story from her informants only a few of them took up the challenge. Her informants did not necessarily produce narratives defined in terms of a unifying or coherent story although they answered her questions. This did not mean, as she says, that these people lacked narrative competence.

3.11 In my experience of interviewing, Burgos' theory about having a story to tell made a great deal of sense to me. But how does this square with the view that all interviews are collaborative endeavours between interviewers and interviewees or 'co-constructions'? I concur with Burgos (unpublished) that the interviewer while acting as the initiator also acts as a social medium or catalyst for the telling of a life story given several conditions. First, the interviewer has to give the interviewee some autonomy to impose their own problematic or way of viewing the world. Second, it is not only a condition that the interviewer legitimates and gives space to an interviewee but also that the interviewee has agreed that her life is of interest for a potential audience. Third, the provocation to engage in telling a life story and adopt the markers of a narrative is the experience of rupture or turning point (see also Riessman 2002, 2008). As Burgos wrote and talked about in the 1980s, following Paul Ricoeur (1985), the narrator seeks 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 is seeking to 'transcend' the rupture and to make sense of it in the relation between the self and others.

Narrative and life story interviews

4.1 I turn now to some data from a recent ESRC-funded study - 'Fatherhood across three generations in Polish, Irish and white British families' in which we interviewed 30 chains of grandfathers, fathers and sons from three groups; (a) first, second and third generation Irish; (b) first generation Polish and their fathers and sons; and (c) three generations of white British (N=89 interviews). The ages of the youngest generation ranged between 5 and 17 years. (See Brannen 2012; Brannen et al. in press 2013). The study set out to examine change and continuity in fatherhood, including those whose lives were shaped by migration, the experiences of being a son, and the relationships and processes through which fatherhood is transmitted. It adopted and adapted a biographic-narrative interview approach (Wengraf 2001). The research participants were invited to recount their lives with a minimum of guidance and intervention. Interviewees were then asked to elaborate on their narrative – on the events and experiences chosen by the interviewer that figured in the initial narrative, in the order of telling. We adapted the method to include a further part of the interview (in some cases at a second sitting) in which we asked questions relating to the specific foci of the study if they had not already been covered in sufficient detail.

4.2 In this study despite an invitation to tell a life story, some engaged with the narrative mode fully, a few barely or not at all.

Connor: a performative narrative

4.3 Connor responded to the invitation to tell a life story with an initial narrative consisting of 2,800 words. [2] Connor's story is emblematic; it is the stuff of Irish fiction – the unfortunate Irish childhood. Connor was aged 77 at interview. He grew up in Dublin and first migrated to England aged 16 to find work in a rope-making factory. In this story, as was the case with several of the other older Irish migrants interviewed, Connor positioned himself as a survivor and a hero who had struggled successfully against the odds. [3] In this sense it is clear why he tells the story in this way. For such narratives told from present vantage points are normative, constituting resources which set up a moral worldview and warrant the person's current position in it.

4.4 Connor uses the emplotment of time to tell a dramatic story in which the telling suggests strong elements of performativity. His story begins with a description of an unpromising start in life; he was the last of seven children, lost both his parents by the age of two, and was hospitalised for suspected tuberculosis. In what he selects to tell Connor is careful to foreground particular information and thereby to background other information (Franzosi 1998). The accomplished manner of its telling suggests it is a well worn story. He carefully sets the scene for a denouement; this takes the form of an accident that happened to him as a baby in the hospital and which nearly wrecked his life.

'And the dad (his dad) went to America and then came back from America ... – he was a plasterer. And then uh, what happened, they must have had me then like you know, cos 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, 2 and a half – there's about 10 months between the two of them. 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 that was how, the way (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? ... After the father and mother died they took me away and put me into a hospital because they had to examine me and all that so that I hadn't got the TB, you know tuberculosis... It was rampant in those years, the 1930s, in the '30s you know – it was rampant it was. There were so many dying of TB them years you know. Anyway I didn't have it. 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.'

4.5 Performativity is evident in the way Connor keeps his audience's attention. Connor uses repetition to create a dramatic effect; for example, '[tuberculosis] *was rampant in those years*'; '*it was rampant it was*'.

We see how Connor seeks to foreshadow a sense of the inevitability of misfortune as he narrates one misfortune after another. Referring to his father's death he employs direct speech quoting his mother's words to create a dramatic effect to draw the audience in; *'I won't be dead a year, and he'll be behind me'*. He builds towards the climax of his story, keeping his audience focused on his story through a number of asides – *'Well I'm getting to the story'*. He also poses rhetorical questions to his audience, dramatically setting a scene of seeming normality – *'when you're a baby everybody likes to pick you up, don't they?'* Then he turns to the 'crisis' of the story; when a nurse dropped him, breaking his back.

4.6 From the start of his narrative it is obvious that Connor is appealing to his audience suggesting that, despite the apparent enormity of losing both parents so young and having had his back broken as a baby and having been brought up in institutions, these misfortunes can be overcome. For example, in relation to the loss of his parents he again poses a rhetorical question, suggesting that this is less of a problem than it seems; *'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?'*

4.7 Connor recounted spending several years in hospital and convalescent homes before being sent to an Industrial School run by the Christian Brothers where he was trained for a trade. Despite the recent adverse publicity given to such institutions in Ireland from his current vantage point Connor minimises the effects of this experience, stressing that he was not subject to any sexual abuse there but also adding that he would not say anything further about this time of his life.

4.8 This positive gloss on an unfortunate life leads to the 'break' or turning point in Connor's narrative and life, a phase of redressive action in Turner's terms (Turner 1974). This phase follows a state of liminality that contains the germ of future social developments in which Connor turns his life around. The upward turn in Connor's life course trajectory takes place after his second migration to the UK at the age of 25, when Connor was offered the chance to become a foreman in a large building firm. He grasped this opportunity with both hands. In the way that Connor tells his story the 'goodness' of the present is magnified by the juxtaposition with the misfortune and poverty of the past (McAdams 1993: 104).

4.9 Performativity is evident in the manner in which he demonstrates his success. Connor's description of being given a company car is metonymic, symbolising or standing for the sense of pride and status Connor takes in his success, both then and now. Again, his success is made vivid through the re-enactment of the moment as he recounts his story by employing 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. G 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.'

4.10 In Connor's case his opening narrative is carefully constructed to set a scenario of misfortunes which moves swiftly towards a redemptive heroic narrative. The transformative aspects of his biography are present also in his later responses to questions about any difficulties in settling in England. He was keen to put across how he overcame the considerable discrimination which was meted out to Irish people at the time. In this next quote we see how, when asked about his Irish and British identifications, Connor draws positively on the resources of his family's history and their connection to Britain though Ireland's colonised past. In associating himself with Britain he argues that members of his family had fought for Britain in two world wars. Thus, while acknowledging the existence of overt discrimination towards the Irish, he warrants his ability to have escaped it through the status he achieved in the workplace, in particular his ability to hire and fire. Thus in looking back from the present vantage point of a 'successful life', Connor demonstrates strategies of resistance to discrimination and thereby distances himself from the experiences of other Irishmen who had less successful biographies than himself.

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?

The dramatic techniques employed here include again rhetorical questions to keep his audience involved and addressing his audience directly, admonishing them about which aspects of his biography they should take into account; *'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?'*

4.11 Here the work of storytelling is integral to the analysis of Connor's life as a migrant so that, as Gubrium and Holstein (2009) suggest, matters of performativity or presentation become central to the analysis of interviews and narrative production (p.83). Relatedly, what also determines how interviewees engage with the narrative mode in the interview are the current purposes of telling their story *for the tellers*. Coleman (1991) makes this argument on the basis of his research on reminiscence groups run with

the elderly in institutional settings. He argues that the current context of telling intersects with the experiences of people's lives (Coleman 1991). Reflecting contrasting cultural conceptions of old age of serenity and wisdom versus dependence and loss Coleman found that, contrary to the therapeutic aims behind reminiscence as a process of life review, some elderly people resisted the review process, while others created stories in which they boosted their egos at the expense of others in the reminiscence groups.

Eamon: Rejecting the narrative mode

4.12 Some potential narrators in the fathers study rejected the narrative mode, only barely hinting at a life untold. In this next case we had to create 'a researcher narrative' out of this man's life. Eamon was 84 years old at interview and had grown up in the west of Ireland. He migrated aged 19 and worked in construction most of his life in the UK. He was in poor health at interview and has since died. He gave no initial narrative. In response to the question, '*Can you just tell me the story of your life? You can start where you want*', all he said was '*A very different life altogether*'. The researcher who interviewed him wrote in her field notes as follows;

He was very quietly spoken and it was difficult to understand him at times. Given ... the fact that he found it impossible to respond to the SQUIN,^[4] I decided that the best thing was to converse with him... I therefore spoke much more than I usually would and tended to raise my voice though I don't think he had a hearing problem! There was also a lot of repetition of what he said so that I could confirm I had got it right... His answers were very brief to start with, but as he relaxed he began to expand on his answers.

4.13 One way in which we created a narrative was to focus on some of Eamon's 'small stories' (Bamberg 2004, Phoenix 2009). For example, in response to a series of specific questions and through the interviewer's method of providing the interviewee with cues, some clues about Eamon's childhood in Ireland emerged.

- I: Uhuh. (pause 7) um (pause) and did your dad work long hours, was it hard work?
- R: It was (inaudible) (Uhuh, uhuh) that time there there was no work, only on the farm (Yeah yeah) and there was no money. Nine shillings a week you used to get, dole money. (?) To feed seven of us.
- I: Yeah yeah. I've spoken to some grandfathers about your age who have come over (pause) who came over to Ireland (?) and they didn't have electricity in the farm or -
- R: No such thing. (No) No such thing as a tap in the house. (Yeah) All they had was turf for the fire. Everything was cooked on the fire.
- I: Everything was cooked on the fire was it? Uhuh.
- R: A turf fire.
- I: Was it cold in the bedrooms when -
- R: It certainly was (inaudible)
- I: Yeah yeah.
- R: They were all thatched roofs. Mostly all (?)
- I: Thatched roofs, yes. And because your dad was working a lot, did he have other jobs or just on the farm?
- R: Just on the farm.
- I: Yeah yeah. Did that mean that you didn't see him much? Or were you able to see a bit of him?
- R: I was only there until I was 14, going to school. (Yeah) After that I was gone away, working for the postman.
- I: Yeah you worked on this other farm then and you had to leave home.
- R: I had to leave home.

• **4.14** Compared with Connor's narrative, we are given little idea of how Eamon interpreted his life. As Ricoeur (1985) suggests in his discussion of identity as a process of 'emplotment', there is a tension between the self experienced as continuity – often described in terms of attributes which are described as unchanging and the self as experienced and presented as discontinuous or developmental – how we view ourselves as we once were and how we will become. But Eamon tells us little. Like other first generation Irish men in the study, Eamon answered the question about his ethnic identification in terms of the county where he was born and grew up. Asked what it means to be Irish he also referred to an ascribed status, '*it's just that I'm Irish and that's it. But I'm here so long now*'. His answer was definitive; his identity is given and appears not to be one he has struggled to hang on to. However the sad music of the remark '*I'm here so long now*' led me to wonder if Eamon was thinking back to something he mentioned earlier having once wanted to return to Ireland or emigrate to America but that his wife had been against it. Perhaps the remark is a rationalisation. Or perhaps long ago he accepted and resigned himself to the situation especially in the context of his perception of the difficulty at the time to find a better life in either country; '*If life was as good in Ireland as it was here (Uhuh) it wasn't too good here, but if it was as good in Ireland a lot of us would have stayed. But there was nothing in it. (Yeah yeah) There was nothing in it.*' This is perhaps a clue to his opening remark – '*A different life altogether*' – that the story of his life is not what he might have wished for and therefore he felt not worth the telling.

4.15 Apart from analysing hints of things largely unsaid, what other ways did we make sense of this case? While Eamon said comparatively little, nonetheless he made a strong impression and evoked an emotional response in us that undoubtedly shaped our response to Eamon. Eamon was in poor health and we had waited some months to interview him as he had been in hospital for some time. A reflective aspect was built into our methodology as we wrote extensive field notes both following data collection and in writing up each case when the transcript became available. The researcher who interviewed him found the interview a poignant experience because of Eamon's vulnerability reminding her of her own

father.

Eamon was such a lovely man ... I really warmed to him. I found it difficult to leave for lots of reasons not least because I sensed he didn't often get the opportunity to chat with someone and, because of his frailty. He seemed rather vulnerable... I wanted to give him a peck on the cheek when I left, but felt that probably I shouldn't. I did touch his arm affectionately though... He came to see me out as he had to lock the door after me and after we'd chatted for a while on the doorstep he stood there with his Zimmer frame waving to me, which I found incredibly poignant. (Field note)

The researcher's emotional engagement in drawing out Eamon's narrative was important. An ethical concern of the study was to make the experience as pleasant as possible for participants. However we were aware from those who refused to take part in the study that, for some, looking back to their early days as a migrant was too painful.

4.16 Nonetheless in cases like Eamon we were able to construct 'a second order narrative' (Elliott 2005) by mapping the bare bones of Eamon's biography. In this we would argue it is important to distinguish between the ethics of care in an interview context from the methodological concerns of analysis, a point that is not necessarily given much attention (see Thomas 2010). Via an examination of Eamon's life history, we were able to demonstrate the ways in which Eamon's life course trajectory resembled those of his Irish cohort. We compared and contrasted his life history with those of his generation and situated the analysis in the literature and knowledge of the Irish in the UK and Ireland in the relevant periods. In analysing the life histories we identified and disambiguated the life events and life course transitions from the interviewee's interpretations. We found it important for comparative purposes to separate the two, enabling us to examine and compare the life course trajectories both within each 'ethnic group' in our study but also to make comparisons across the groups and across the three generations.

4.17 This life history analysis suggested how Eamon, like all but one of the ten Irish migrants interviewed in that generation (one was of middle class origin), came from a large family, grew up in poverty and in a poor farming area. His migration and that of his father and siblings reflected the endemic pattern of migration from Ireland in the period up to the 1960s.^[5] Like most working class Irish of that generation Eamon left primary school at 14 (Gray & O'Carroll 2012).^[6] Unemployment in Ireland was high and wages very low. Eamon went to work on the postman's small farm and then was employed in the local shop. He migrated like most Irishmen at the time as a young single man (aged 19 in 1949) and found work in England in a factory and then joined the construction sector (Walter 1999) where the work was insecure, unregulated and dangerous (Clegg 1979). He stayed in the building industry until forced to leave because of illhealth when he became a driver. When he got married finding housing was a problem both because of the shortage in postwar Britain but also because of widespread discrimination against the Irish. Eamon first lived in digs with other Irishmen and at marriage shared accommodation with other Irish families; in the 1980s the couple eventually bought their own council house. As with many migrants Eamon was involved in transnational financial transfers to his family in Ireland. Also, like many Irish migrants he married an Irish girl he met in London through London Irish community associations and had a smaller family compared with his family of origin. As the men suggested, success in England was measured by maintaining steady (manual) work, buying and renovating homes, and bringing up children to do better than they had done. Indeed the Irish have been remarkably successful in terms of upward mobility in the next generation (Walter 1999). In Eamon's case he made mention of his pride in never having relied on social security benefits.

4.18 Through mapping and comparing the life course trajectories within wider historically situated macro-sociological processes we were able to create a researcher narrative and examine how far Eamon's case reflected the 'collective story' (Bertaux & Thompson 1997) of other Irish migrants of his generation. Reading widely and accessing relevant data relating to the period of informants' lives were key to contextualising and analysing narrative accounts and those accounts which contained limited narrative talk.

Discussion

5.1 In the paper I have reflected upon the often surprising ways in which informants respond to interview questions, sometimes irrespective of the method, question or research topic. I have considered the conditions under which interviewees engage in narrative talk and suggested that people engage with this mode to some extent under the conditions of their own choosing. Life stories may be generated when people are explicitly invited to tell them. However, in some cases interviewees produced life stories whether or not they are asked to do so provided they were given the space and considered that their story was of some interest. Life story telling also seemed to be prompted by having a story to tell – often some break or turning point, or rupture of canonical expectations (Riessman 2002, 2008), in relation to which the narrator seeks to make a coherent entity from the associated heterogeneous and often conflicting ideological positions, experiences, feelings. In that sense the narrator is seeking to 'transcend' a rupture.

5.2 In analysing the ways in which two interviewees engaged (or not) with the narrative mode, I have drawn attention to the processes by which meaning is achieved in storytelling and made sense of by the research analyst. As Connor's story suggests, his narrative is a performance act and suggests a well worn story, while Eamon is neither an accomplished raconteur nor does he attempt to tell a story. Connor's story has a purpose; it is told from the present vantage point of what he now considers amounts to a successful life. Thus, analytically it was important to understand that life stories tell us not only about how informants experienced, and continue to experience, the past, but also about how they experience

the present and how they may live their lives in the future. In that sense Connor's redemptive story is more than a gloss on life but a way of living a life.

5.3 I have also sought to argue that the narrative approach that Connor adopts is one that demonstrates considerable performativity. Thus it is important that in interpreting his story account is taken of its form – what Connor tells and does not tell the listener, the way Connor presents his story and how he engages his audience. In this sense narrative production becomes a central part of the analysis of qualitative interviews.

5.4 In the analysis of Connor's narrative I have pointed to the ways by which Connor constructs his story, building up towards a climax of his misfortunes and a turning point which brought repair or redemption. This case demonstrates considerable story telling skills and use of dramatic devices. Connor's story is directed to someone, to a listener (the researcher) and set in a particular context or setting (the research interview) (Riessman 2008). As Riessman (2008) suggests drawing upon Goffman, we are forever composing impressions of ourselves and projecting an impression of who we are (p.106). As I have sought to demonstrate in Connor's case, his initial narrative denotes a particular genre of talk. His use of direct speech has the effect of building credibility; he draws in the listener and seeks to lend immediacy to his narrative (p.109). Connor uses the dramatic ploy of the aside where he slips out of the plot to engage the audience and make them reflect and consider his own interpretation of his life. In addition he uses repetition to mark key moments in the narrative.

5.5 More generally, attention to narrative form alerts us to the fact that memories are not only reflections of the past but that they are also subject to restoration, refracted through contemporary time frames and lenses that are shaped by a multiplicity of factors to do with the nature of the study, the particular type or method of study, the cultural resources and repertoire 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 in contemporary time. Similarly, researchers' interpretations in understanding the meanings that stories have for individuals are also temporal and reflect our own vantage points.

5.6 In reflecting upon the case of Eamon where no life story was forthcoming despite the request, I have reflected upon the creation of narrative out of the bare bones of a life history produced out of brief responses to questions, informed by the researcher's field notes (indicating our researchers' emotional engagement with the case). In particular I have argued that it is important to historicise the life by comparing the life history with those of Irishmen of the same generation and backgrounds and to set the analysis within the literature on the period. As Jane Elliott (2005) argues, many of the issues faced in analysing qualitative narrative data are the same as for other types of data.

Conclusion

6.1 In conclusion, it is important to stress that lives told or untold require contextualisation through filling in the wider context. Yet qualitative studies, and even methodological texts, give surprisingly little attention to methods for eliciting historical and geographical contextualisation and often much more to issues of reflexivity. In the reporting of much micro-sociological research the wider context is often allowed to speak for itself. Contextualisation is a part of analysis but is either left out or bracketed off in a separate chapter of a book or thesis and rarely brought to bear explicitly in the analysis of primary data. Only when working across different countries does contextualisation receive special attention (Hantrais 1999). Especially in studies involving migrant populations, knowledge about local labour markets and cultures in the originating country and the country of arrival is relevant; also knowledge of institutional systems which shape normative educational trajectories; and macro level structures concerning political, economic and historical change. Too often these are taken for granted when to the eyes of a stranger these are crucial to understanding the phenomena under study (Brannen & Nilsen 2002, 2011).

6.2 Yet life stories that combine narrative and contextual/biographical approaches can suggest the complex interplay between the way people speak about their experiences and the structures against which such talk needs to be understood (McCleod & Thomson 2009). This requires both the art of representation and scientific methods; it requires bringing together the critical elements of a life in a convincing and rigorous way to make an argument or to offer an explanation; to develop 'disciplined systematic analyses of how biographies are produced, shared and transmitted'. 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: 167–168). As those writing about the genre of literary biography recognise, there is no one method of doing this (Lee 2009: 18).

6.3 Inevitably the contextualisation of life stories requires the use of more than one data source. In the past life course studies such as those of Glen Elder and the Gluecks directly addressed issues of historical context; they did this by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data albeit the processes of data integration were rarely made explicit (Nilsen & Brannen 2011). In life story research it is usual to rely on secondary data, data that were collected for different purposes and via different methods. Nonetheless these data need to be scrutinised in order to help us assess how far our own primary data are typical, emergent or deviant cases.

6.4 Returning to the debate surrounding narrative referred to at the beginning of the paper, I would endorse the view that life story research should incorporate in equal measure a focus on both talk and context; only then will it guard against naïve exponents of narrative approaches, in particular the prioritising of 'voice'. As Paul Atkinson (2009) argues, it is necessary to problematise the Romantic notion of narrative and move beyond informant testimony and the idea of bearing witness to what actually happened as a simplistic reflection of lived experience. Just as, in a parallel way, we need to see quantitative data as products of the methods used and questions posed. As Hammersley (1989) argues,

the research participants are not necessarily best placed to define or even adequately know fully the context in which they live. Spaces need to be left for the researcher to produce a sociological narrative, and to engage in what Giddens (1993) termed the 'double hermeneutic'. Life stories have much to contribute in the development of new ways of bringing methods and data together. In any case in a rapidly changing and globalising world the demand to understand across time and space how lives are lived and narrated by actors will grow alongside a demand for trend data and comparative analysis at global, national and regional levels.

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Notes

¹What remained in my memory was the concern I felt at the time about her young child who was busy destroying the sound system in the sitting room, an activity which his mother, so engrossed in telling her story was only occasionally distracted by.

²The transcript was 33,000 words.

³Others recounted harsh but happy childhoods in Ireland. Once (early) adulthood was reached migration was seen as inevitable.

⁴SQUIN stands for a 'single question aimed at inducing narrative' (Wengraf 2001).

⁵The country's failure to develop post independence accelerated rather than stemmed an already existent migration pattern (Garvin 2004).

⁶Secondary education was under the church's influence and was not free until 1967 (Garvin 2004).

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