Encounters with the Library: Understanding Experience Using the Life History Method

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Abstract

Drawing on the author's own research, this article explores the use of life histories as method and the ways in which this research can contribute to new understandings about the experiential relationships between libraries and users. The article is divided into four parts. Part one defines the essential elements of a life history research study. Part two describes how to design a life history research study. Part three examines ethical, methodological, and interpretive issues related to issues of organizational insiderness and internal validity and textual authority. The author concludes by outlining the potential benefits and pitfalls of using life histories and discusses how life history research, and qualitative research in general, can enrich and broaden our understanding of library science theory and practice.

Katheryn's profile is unusual for someone with aspirations of becoming a librarian. She recently graduated from the University of Southern California, earning a bachelor's degree in history with an emphasis in medieval society. The story of her pre-professional and pre-educational socialization into librarianship is somewhat unique because, as a woman in her early twenties, she made the deliberate decision to become a librarian many years before most of us would consider a career in librarianship. Katheryn explains, "Well, I've been going to libraries with my Mom since I was three, since she could bring me in there and be sure that I wasn't going to scream, and they were all good experiences."

Her mother was a volunteer in the local public library and Katheryn describes how being brought into "the back room of the library" where the photocopiers and other equipment resided made her curious about

what people did there. However, as children, we are often exposed to the "back rooms" of other vocations. For example, a child may see cooks preparing meals at a restaurant, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he or she will develop an urge to be a chef. While I felt that it was important to understand Katheryn's socialization from a process and place perspective, I also wanted to understand what reflexive and affective factors may have contributed to her interest in becoming a librarian.

After listening to our first interview, I spoke with her a second time with the intent of getting her to think more about what drove her *desire* to become a librarian. In short, what triggered that moment from being in a library to wanting to become a librarian.

Author: In our first interview, you had stated that, in a broad sense, your desire at this point is primarily in public service. Has [being a student worker in the library] reinforced that desire?

Katheryn: In some ways, yeah. The excitedness, the weird, geeky excitedness of showing someone how to use [the resources]—that's *really* cool. I like that. And I like knowing where to point people to and having people who don't know where to find it, then having people go [there]. And I really like that. And I think that's the reason why I want to do public service, and, in fact, probably why I want to do more research and reference oriented librarianship than otherwise because there's that aspect of people actively looking for sources. And I can help them find them.

We both laughed out loud at that comment, but I knew exactly what she was talking about. I had felt the same thing as I began my own journey into this profession—this weird, geeky profession called librarianship.

Introduction

The above text is an excerpt from an ongoing, five-year life history research study that utilizes qualitative techniques of guided conversations, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis to understand the socialization experiences of seven young people who have made the deliberate decision to become librarians. Findings from this study will be used to develop new theories about occupational induction into librarianship that could inform better strategies of recruitment and retention. In capturing their life histories, the study attempts to not only document facts underlying how these individuals became socialized but to bring voice to the contextualized journeys of their own occupational induction experiences.

The decision to use life histories as a method to document processes of socialization into librarianship was based on three defining features of life history research described by Cole and Knowles (2001). First, life history research is intended to "advance understanding about the complex interactions between individuals' lives and the institutional and societal contexts in which they are lived" (p. 126). Similar to other service-oriented organizations governed by a commitment to educate their clientele, libraries possess a strong social connection to the people who utilize their resources

and services. It is within this domain that the decision to pursue a career in librarianship often takes root. A life history approach provides a method for documenting these experiences over time, placing them in proper social and cultural contexts, and executing a research project that helps answer questions about why someone might chose to become a librarian.

Cole and Knowles also describe life history studies as contributing "more just and dignified explorations and renderings of the human condition, that, in turn, lead to the enhancement of qualities and conditions under which lives are lived" (p. 126). A second defining feature of life history research is that it gives voice to the experienced life, particularly for those whose voices may be unheard or deliberately ignored or suppressed. Two subjects in my study are from underrepresented groups. Their stories of socialization are particularly important framed against current concepts of diversity and multiculturalism in librarianship (Honma, 2005) and as they relate to ongoing initiatives to recruit and retain minority librarians (Darby, 2005; Harralson, 2001).

Life history research also tells people's stories in their own words and, in this way, conveys a representation of human experience that draws readers into the interpretative process. Readers are invited to make meaning and to form judgments based on an interpretation of the text as it is viewed through their own realities. This is the third intention of life history research, according to Cole and Knowles (2001). By documenting the stories of seven individuals as they progress toward professional inclusion, I am attempting to construct stories of socialization that are relevant and accessible to the reader.

Contemporary research about the possible connections between the informal socialization of individuals prior to considering a career in librarianship and the eventual decision to become a librarian is empirically underdeveloped and largely anecdotal. While there are many methods a researcher could use to investigate this issue, I chose a life history approach because it provides an effective means of documenting, in depth and over time, individual stories of professional induction. As with other qualitative methodologies, researchers using a life history method must develop their studies based on good design, reflexive modes of implementation and analysis, and sound ethical principles.

The next section of the article will describe the essential design elements of a life history study. This is followed by an exploration of two critical methodological and ethical issues that may arise while conducting a life history study: negotiating organizational insiderness and the challenges associated with concepts of validity and textual authority. The article concludes by outlining the potential benefits and pitfalls of life history research and placing qualitative life histories within the larger milieu of library science research and practice.

Designing a Life History Study

A good life history study disrupts traditional assumptions about what is known or considered to be "the truth" and challenges the self-evident meaning of dominant culture language. This construct forces the reader to confront subjective perceptions of others (Goodson, 2001). However, the concept of the "life" in a life history study is somewhat misleading because an individual's entire biography is rarely the object of analysis (Kouritzin, 2000). Most life histories contextualize specific events or issues around the experienced lives of others. For example, Richie (2001) used life histories to investigate the challenges formerly incarcerated women faced when they returned to their communities. Grossman (1990) contributed to the literature on reforming teacher education by investigating the pedagogical content knowledge of English among beginning teachers and their emerging beliefs about classroom instruction. Sawyer (2005) used life histories to understand how various social institutions influence opportunities for active engagement in civic leadership by young people. In these and most other cases, life histories are purposefully bounded by the research question underpinning the study and do not attempt to document the entire life of an individual.

The concept of "history" in life history research refers to the practical aspects of how investigators must document the ways in which people experience the world. Unless an investigator can shadow the respondent wherever he or she goes, and can do so without influencing the collection of data and the interpretation of findings, the narrative stories in a life history are always a reflection of lives lived. As Jarvinen points out, "From the point of view of the present, there is no objective past in the history of individuals, institutions or societies. There is no past to be captured, understood and described in its pure essence. There is only a past—or plurality of pasts—constructed from the point of view of an ever-changing present" (2004, p. 47). From the standpoint of analyzing the data from life histories, the researcher must always understand that "With every new present, there comes a new past" (p. 47). Life histories always document the past and, therefore, findings represent perceptions of events as interpreted by the respondent at any given moment in the present.

Sampling and Identifying Data Sources

Consider the following: at a medium-sized, urban university, research conducted by the Office of Student Affairs demonstrates that significantly more first-generation students have difficulty adjusting to the academic rigors of college than those students with parents who attended college. In the library, first-generation students have been observed studying, but anecdotal evidence indicates that they rarely seek help at the reference desk or take advantage of the many services offered by the library. The librarians determine that one possible strategy to reduce stress and increase a sense

of self-efficacy among first-generation students is to develop programs to improve their knowledge of library resources and services. Unfortunately, no data exists to help us understand the information-seeking behavior of first-generation students and their utilization of library resources and services.

Designing a life history study around this research problem requires identification and selection of a representative sample of respondents and determining what types of additional sources could be used to triangulate the findings (Creswell, 1998). The underlying purpose is not to extrapolate broad generalizations or to formulate empiricist explanations of phenomena but to challenge existing assumptions, develop intimate familiarity with a specific issue, and, in this particular example, to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation college students as it is viewed from their own realities (Plummer, 2001).

Sample sizes in life history research are usually very small because gathering, recording, and interpreting the data can be intense and time-consuming. In addition, life histories rarely rely on methods of random sampling (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). According to Patton (1987; see also Morse, 1994), samples can be developed using one of four general methods:

1. *Extreme or intense case sampling.* Respondents are selected because their experiential characteristics "maximize the factors of interest" in a study (Morse, 1994, p. 229). Data from this approach is intended to clarify important factors relevant to the study.
2. *Maximum variety sampling.* This approach uses a heterogeneous group of respondents and documents commonalities among them. Data from this sampling method highlights cases of uniqueness or reveals shared patterns across the sample group.
3. *Critical case sampling.* This approach is used to ensure detailed, in-depth information on critical experiences. The purpose is to gather data on critical incidents that may inform other situations or events.
4. *Intensity sampling.* This approach emphasizes the selection of respondents because they are intimate authorities about a particular experience. Respondents are chosen because they possess a deep understanding of a particular issue or phenomena.

Once a sampling method has been determined, the identification of participants in a life history study generally involves a process of purposive discovery governed by convenience (the researcher has easy access to the respondent), opportunity (a chance meeting with someone willing to participate), or snowballing (a respondent identifies others who might be able to participate) (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

Although conducting extensive interviews with respondents is the most common technique used to gather life history data, other biographical documents may be utilized. These can include autobiographies, memoirs,

diaries, personal journals, oral histories, electronic correspondence, and personal documents. This material can help to establish validity, understand what may have been omitted from memory, and verify factual information (Kouritzin, 2000; Roberts, 2002). When designing a life history study, it is important to consider any documents that illuminate and expand upon an individual's contextualized experiences. For example, in determining the information-seeking habits of first-generation students, permission to examine completed course assignments, library records, and email correspondence with professors could prove helpful.

Negotiating Participation and Access

The next step after identifying a sample of respondents is to negotiate access and participation (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Because life history interviews are personal encounters that probe in depth the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others, a useful strategy for encouraging participation is to approach interaction with respondents from a social constructionist perspective (Shotter, 1993). Presented this way, new meaning and knowledge emerges in the form of a co-constructed journey of exploration. This dynamic transcends the basic dichotomy of the researcher and the researched to a more complex and sophisticated framework that acknowledges the context-dependent and communicative-driven interplay between the researcher, the participant, and the social worlds that they occupy.

Life history interviews may also elicit highly personal information or reveal illegal or deviant behavior (for example, "I only come to the library to download movies"). This raises important ethical issues. As a consequence, researchers have a responsibility to protect the privacy of anyone involved in the research project and to inform respondents of their rights as subjects of a research study (Johnson, 2002). These rights include being told the purpose and intended outcomes of the research study; knowing how and to what extent personal information will be protected; being told that they can ask questions or express concerns at any time before, during, or after the study; being told that they can withdraw from the study at any time; having a copy of any consent form used for the study; and knowing how, to whom, and in what form findings will be reported. For academic librarians conducting practitioner research, the rights of participants are governed by the institutional review boards of their school, and they must be followed very carefully (Pritchard, 2002).

Interviewing Techniques and Tactics

As noted, the most common technique for gathering life history data is to interview respondents. The goal is to create an in-depth profile of the respondent's life experiences relative to the research problem being investigated. From an organizational perspective, qualitative interviewing can be effective in evaluating library programs and services that focus on individualized outcomes; documenting and describing programmatic pro-

cesses; analyzing experiential variables among participants in a program; assessing trends in services or programs that are considered to be changing or evolving; understanding the underlying meaning of a service or program for participants; and identifying variations in design and implementation of programs at various sites (Patton, 1987, pp. 40–42). There are several comprehensive guides to doing qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998). Kvale, in particular, should be consulted for a detailed description of how to design a research study that relies on qualitative interviewing. However, the distinctive features of a life history project place greater emphasis on specific aspects of planning and implementing interviews with respondents. In general, these encompass four overlapping activities: being well prepared throughout the research process; utilizing unstructured, open-ended interview protocols; practicing active listening techniques; and conveying an understanding of the respondent's experience (Plummer, 2001).

Qualitative research interviews represent an active process of ongoing intellectual discovery. This means that a constant flow of new knowledge and meaning emerges from the examination of variables and their interrelationships identified from the data. Interviews require careful preparation and planning by the researcher. This is especially important with regard to developing an effective protocol that captures data relevant to the study's purpose while, at the same time, recognizing the need to schedule possible follow-up questions and to analyze relevant secondary documents that may help record and preserve context. The emergent nature of life history interviews also means that some questions must be adapted to each respondent's lived experiences since no two people experience events or interpret meaning in exactly the same way. Variables in experiences and interpretive meanings are important in developing a complete understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Finally, careful preparation also includes practical issues, such as purchasing a reliable tape recorder and scheduling a quiet place to conduct the interview. These issues may seem mundane, but they are vital in ensuring that each interview session maximizes the opportunity to reveal new data.

Careful planning is also important because life history interviews place a greater emphasis on unstructured and open-ended forms of inquiry. Generally defined as guided conversations (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Rubin & Rubin, 1995), the intention of a life history interview is to encourage a relationship with the respondent that is not "so blatantly purposeful that mutuality and authentic engagement is lost" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 72). The conversation is guided because the purpose of the research is to conduct an intensive exploration of specific lived experiences; the purpose is not to develop a comprehensive biographical profile of the individual. Within this framework, the challenge for the researcher is to develop a guided conversation protocol that encourages opportunities to understand

as much as possible about relevant moments in a person's life but that is not so open-ended and unfocused that the questions generate an excessive amount of needless information.

The emergent nature of an unstructured, open-ended guided conversation requires active listening techniques in order to hear the underlying meaning of what is being said (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and to obtain a deeper understanding of the knowledge possessed by others (Fiumara, 1990). During a life history interview, the researcher must be cognizant of the fact that new information may emerge at any time. However, the tape recorder is not a substitute for practicing good listening techniques. For example, in my life history study of newcomer socialization into the profession, "Roscoe" noted that one of his motivations for wanting to pursue a career in academic librarianship was witnessing what he described as "so many bizarre things around here and things that——that I don't think are right." Although this statement was made during an initial discussion about his growing professional interests, asking a series of follow-up questions was the key to unlocking the fact that being a library director was one of the initial factors influencing Roscoe's decision to pursue a degree in library science. It is important to note that, because life history interviews are the result of a discursively co-constructed journey of discovery, new meaning and new knowledge are not only revealed through the intersubjective relationship between the researcher and the respondent; the interaction itself becomes a contributor to revealing additional insight and understanding (Koschmann et al., 2005).

The fourth distinctive feature of a life history study that governs how interviews are designed and carried out is to show empathy to those we interview. Empathizing involves more than nonverbal cues of affirmation and acknowledgment made (often subconsciously) during an interview. To better understand the role of empathy in qualitative interviewing, I borrow from the conceptual work of Bondi (2003) and her exploration of power and positionality in feminist geography fieldwork. She notes that empathy is important in qualitative interviewing because it "enables the creation of interpersonal and intrapsychic spaces in which similarities and differences can be mobilised, expressed and explored" (p. 67). This is why practicing good listening skills is so important. An interview is a division of labor between the respondent as speaker and the researcher as listener. However, when sharing thoughts and emotions about personal experiences, participants want to feel that they are being understood and that what they say holds special meaning for the researcher. This requires the investigator to identify with the person being interviewed while remaining cognizant of his/her own feelings in order to focus on the responsibility of carrying out the research agenda. However, rather than occurring simultaneously, Bondi (2003) argues that this dynamic represents an oscillation between positions of immersion in the other's story and objective distancing by

the researcher. As she concludes, this oscillation "creates what might be described as room to maneuver, or as a kind of psychic space in which affinities and similarities can be recognized, at the same time as retaining a sense of difference and distance. Empathy can be thought of in terms of psychic space in which movement between positions is possible" (p. 73). Because life history research is intended to probe deeply into the experiential lives of others, empathy framed in this way can be a useful approach for conducting effective and meaningful interviews.

Managing and Analyzing the Data

The most significant task for the researcher in managing qualitative data is to transcribe the interviews and efficiently organize any supplemental material gathered in support of the study (Plummer, 2001). Effective management and organization of life history data is important because it facilitates meaningful and trustworthy analysis, interpretation, and reporting of findings. However, life history research generates a significant volume of information. For example, there can be as much as a one to ten ratio between the hours spent interviewing respondents and the hours needed to transcribe and analyze the data. This can make the act of transcription an arduous task. Among the strategies researchers can use to reduce time spent transcribing is to edit only those parts of the interview that are specifically relevant to the research topic (although this must be done carefully so that the broader analytic context is not lost) and to delete from the conversation speech hesitations, such as "uh" and "you know" (Plummer, 2001). Another option is to have the tapes edited by a professional transcription service. This can be expensive, but the advantage is that you can save a significant amount of time, which can then be devoted to data analysis and interpretation. Even if a professional service transcribes the tapes, researchers should listen repeatedly to each interview because it helps to identify possible editing errors, aids analysis by highlighting important ideas and themes, and facilitates intimate engagement with the respondent's stories. This latter point is especially critical "because intent and meaning are conveyed as much through how things are said as through the actual words that are used" (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 33; for further insight, see Mishler, 1986).

A positivistic approach to research generally dictates that the act of analysis occurs only after all the data has been acquired. However, in qualitative research, and with life history studies in particular, the processes of gathering and analyzing evidence should be done simultaneously (Boyatzis, 1998). The goal for the researcher is to gain a better understanding of the co-constructed nature of the data as it emerges. The simultaneous gathering and analyzing of data also facilitates the exploration of possible new avenues of discovery with respondents. Cole and Knowles remind us that the researcher is always the primary instrument of analysis in life history

research and, therefore, "requires a kind of mental readiness to understand and accept the complexity of the task, the creative nature of the process, and the requirements of time, patience, and commitment to a sometimes convoluted and chaotic process" (2001, p. 99).

Although the practical act of qualitative data analysis can take many forms (Creswell, 1998), it often begins with coding the data into meaningful analytical units. Coding represents for the researcher the initial stage of interpreting how the respondent views the world and of constructing a story that draws the reader into the lived experiences of others. Whether coding life history data is done manually or with a qualitative analysis software program, such as NVivo or Atlas.ti, assigning codes involves reducing the text into categories that the researcher considers important in relation to the problems being studied (Spradley, 1979). Analysis can begin by either developing codes prior to examining current data, or the researcher may choose an inductive approach that allows codes to emerge as the text is being examined. Although either approach can be effective in allocating units of meaning to each respondent's story, I have found that the emergent nature of life history research generally supports an inductive approach to coding data.

The final analytical step is to arrange the codes into broad groupings that reflect general themes that inform a deeper understanding of the research problems being investigated. For example, in my life history project, statements made by respondents about key experiences in their lives that influenced their decision to enter librarianship (for example, working in the library as a college student) are coded and then arranged into broader conceptual categories (for example, pre-professional work experiences). Identification of conceptual categories helps the researcher determine where commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures of phenomena may exist. This creates the opportunity to raise possible new research questions, to show relationships across data, to delete or add codes, and to arrange codes into hierarchical order (Basit, 2003).

Presenting the Data

Qualitative research studies should always include a deliberate plan for how and in what form findings will be promulgated (Patton, 1987; Wolcott, 2001). In general, the presentation of life history findings can be framed in one of two ways. A study can present each life history as a specific case, followed by a summation of the critical issues that emerged from the analysis. This approach is helpful in highlighting the uniqueness of individual experiences. Another approach would be to present the findings thematically and supported by narrative excerpts drawn from interviews and other sources. Describing key themes that have emerged from the data can be effective in influencing policy because the experiences of respondents can be linked contextually to specific problems or assumptions.

Regardless of how the findings are framed, the goal of any qualitative report "is to bring understanding to complex social phenomena that cannot be reduced to precise, statistical relationships and . . . written in a style that uses literary sensibilities to take readers inside the issues and settings under investigation" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 224). This style of writing raises important questions about how to present life history data effectively. For example, as the primary instrument of interpretation and analysis, the researcher should articulate any possible biases he or she may have about the study and its findings. Acknowledging possible biases reinforces the trustworthiness of the data and helps the reader understand the overall interpretive process used to examine the data. Another important issue is that the researcher must know who the intended audience is and what issues or decisions the study is intended to influence (Plummer, 2001). Knowing the intended audience is important for the librarian as a practitioner-researcher because the goal of a life history study in this context is most likely to provide evidence that could inform new ways of evaluating current practice and to document the uniqueness of individual users of library services and programs.

Life histories are an effective method for giving voice to those who may not otherwise be visible through other forms of inquiry. However, the challenge in writing up life histories is to develop a co-constructed story that respects and highlights the voice of the respondents yet also involves the author in the text as the principle instrument of analysis and interpretation. In addition, raw data cannot inform practice if it rests outside of the larger interpretative contexts brought forth by the researcher. This requires the researcher to be selective in presenting narrative excerpts that contextualize the data. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) suggest the following criteria for editing and presenting the data: *length* (long quotes are difficult to read); *relevance* (link the data to the purpose of the study); *readability* (excerpts should make syntactic sense and not disrupt the overall flow of the text); *comprehensibility* (assure that the underlying meaning of a statement can be understood); and *anonymity* (any information that could reveal the identity of a respondent must be excluded) (p. 187).

METHODOLOGICAL AND INTERPRETATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

Space constraints do not allow for a detailed examination of all possible ethical and methodological dilemmas that could arise during a life history research study. The writings of Cole and Knowles (2001), Plummer (2001), and Goodson and Sikes (2001) should be consulted for complete examinations of pertinent issues. However, there are two critical issues that deserve special attention because they are particularly relevant to the study of libraries and librarianship by practitioner-researchers. These are (1) negotiating organizational insiderness and (2) understanding concepts of validity and researcher positionality in the text. I will follow this by sum-

marizing the potential benefits and pitfalls of applying life histories to the study of library organizations and conclude with a discussion of the ways life history research and other qualitative methodologies can enrich and broaden our understanding of library practice.

Organizational Insiderness

In a previous study I examined the hidden ethical and methodological dilemmas of being an insider participant observer (Labaree, 2002). However, several key points from this study are worth exploring further in the context of the life history method applied to the study of libraries and librarianship. Insiderness in qualitative research refers, in general, to the study of one's own culture or organization. Concomitantly, the concept of outsiderness refers to the act of examining a culture or organization that is unfamiliar to the researcher. A review of the literature highlights at least four implied advantages to being an insider. First, insiderness has value because the researcher will be familiar with the organizational setting and its members. Second, insider status has value because the researcher and the informant will have likely shared common social and occupational experiences (Cerroni-Long, 1994; Kanuha, 2000). The assumption is that experiential commonalities can form the basis for building trust and developing a relationship that contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Third, insiderness implies that the researcher has a greater understanding of how to interpret cultural work habits and practices and obtain key information that is available only to organizational members. And fourth, insiderness has value because it facilitates reflexivity. Introspective analysis based on insider knowledge can lead to the discovery of greater clarity of purpose for the researcher and a deeper understanding of the evolving research process.

Despite these implied advantages, insider status is situational and dependent upon the underlying objectives of the study and level of access to key informants. In short, total immersion into the lived experiences of others can never be fully achieved. The life history researcher must, therefore, continually negotiate with respondents to ensure that mutual trust, access, and clarity of purpose is maintained. Imbedded within this process of continual negotiation are several ethical and methodological dilemmas. For example, an outsider must spend significant time and energy devoted to gaining entry into the research setting. The situatedness of being an insider researcher diminishes the need to gain entry. However, trust and cooperation must still be negotiated because the familiar colleague is now repositioned as a principle investigator of the organization. The added responsibility of studying and interpreting one's own community is especially challenging because any false representations of a phenomena, either real or perceived, could lead to feelings of betrayal on the part of the participants. The outsider has an equal responsibility to avoid false realities, but

they will eventually exit the research setting and become distanced from the consequences of inaccurate representations of people and places.

Another hidden ethical dilemma of being an insider is the challenge of unintended positioning and disclosure of data. This refers to the researcher's status within the organization and how one's position within that organization may influence how others respond to your study. For example, in my life history study, several respondents assumed that I "knew what was going on" with regards to their own socialization experiences because I had been working in the library for a number of years. However, because I wanted to document the respondent's own particular perceptions of reality and because I needed to clarify my own understanding of key issues, I had to remind the respondents that my position as an insider was governed, as well as limited by, my position as a faculty member within the library.

A related issue is the dilemma of shared and significant relationships. An insider researcher may need to interview or otherwise interact with close friends and colleagues. This is not inherently bad. In fact, Coffey (1999) notes that the position of being both an insider and an outsider requires social interaction so that trusting relationships with respondents can develop and grow. However, the issue of shared or significant relationships between the researcher and the researched is complicated by being an insider because the insider brings more to the social setting than previous knowledge about people and events. The research process also requires a newly negotiated dynamic between the researcher and the respondent that ties the two individuals together not only on the basis of collegiality and friendship but also on the additional basis of being a key informant in a life history study. The possible ramifications of damaging this first relationship in pursuit of the second must be clearly understood by the researcher and study participants.

Finally, insiderness influences the notion of disengagement from the research process and raises ethical questions about the researcher's obligations to informants after the study is completed. The issue of disengagement receives relatively little attention in the literature. However, for the insider conducting a life history study, the act of disengagement is critical because the researcher remains in the community once he/she has finished the research. Similar to negotiating trust and cooperation at the initial stage of the research process, disengaging from the research also carries possible repercussions from those who may feel that the study's conclusions or final recommendations are inaccurate. This requires the researcher to consider carefully who participates in the study and to measure how potentially sensitive findings are going to be reported and to whom. A good researcher will make certain that a study's purpose, goals, and potential impact on future decision making are understood thoroughly by everyone before, during, and after the research process.

Validity and Researcher Positionality within the Text

Validity and the author's place within the text are important to any life history study, whether it is being pursued for personal intellectual enrichment or it represents a study intended to evaluate policy or challenge existing assumptions about user behavior. In general, validity refers to the perception that findings are congruent with reality and that what the researcher is intending to investigate is really there (Merriam, 1998). Researcher positionality is concerned with the degree to which the author's place within the text is revealed; it relates to what Tierney describes as the "particular issues that we all face as we translate ourselves from researchers to writers" (1998, p. 52). Understanding the ethical and methodological constructs of validity and researcher positionality in life history research contributes to the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings and helps the reader determine whether there is a strong correlation between the author's interpretation of the data and any recommendations or conclusions presented.

For a life history study to provide insights into the experienced lives of others and to challenge successfully assumptions about current practice, the consumer of life history research must have confidence that the investigator has represented a valid reality of events and people. The challenge, of course, is that reality is subjective, multidimensional, and ever changing. It is, therefore, important to understand that the underlying purpose is not to describe "a reality" but to observe and document an individual's construction of reality (Merriam, 1998). Within this framework, the concept of validity relates to the confidence one has that the mode of analysis is actually investigating what it is supposed to investigate. As Plummer notes "If the subjective story is what the researcher is after, [then] the life history approach becomes the most valid method" (2001, p. 155). The challenge for the researcher in building a case for validity is to minimize perceptions of bias. The goal is not to achieve pure objectivity but to acknowledge and describe potential biases in a way that allows the reader to determine how these biases might influence their own interpretation of the findings. For example, the fact that I am a male researching the socialization experiences of several respondents who are female should be acknowledged because a consumer of the findings from my life history study might believe this to be important in determining how to ultimately interpret the data.

Bias can never be totally purged from a qualitative research study and, as Plummer (2001) notes, bias can arise from the respondent, from the researcher, or as a result of the interaction between the researcher and the respondent. Plummer suggests several validity checks that can be utilized to increase confidence in the findings. For example, the researcher can have the respondent read and critically examine all of the data from the study. This allows the respondent to reflect upon what has been said and to offer additional insight that may further contextualize initial findings. The researcher can also compare the life history data with other types of

biographical sources. As noted earlier, consulting secondary documents can help confirm factual information and determine the chronology of events. Finally, the researcher can strengthen validity by gathering data from individuals who may have knowledge about similar situations. This can include, for example, conducting brief, informal interviews with people who have similar backgrounds and experiences so that critical events described by the study's primary informants can be independently confirmed.

Closely related to the concept of validity in life history research is the issue of how the author presents him- or herself in the text (Tierney, 1998). As noted earlier, a challenge in reporting life history research is to develop a co-constructed story that illuminates the voice of the respondents while also acknowledging the author's role as the principle instrument of analysis and interpretation. Much of this discussion in the field of qualitative inquiry is wrapped up in the ambiguities of postmodernism (Prain, 1997), but here I will focus more on the practical problems of style and narrative voice.

Tierney (1997) argues that qualitative researchers generally present themselves in one of three ways within the text: as narrator, as interviewer, and as participant. As narrator, the author uses the "I" in the text to present a single narration of people and events (for example, "I interviewed Roscoe early Tuesday morning so that there was little chance of being interrupted"). The researcher can also take the position of interviewer. The dialogue is in the form of a question and answer exchange between the respondent and the researcher. The excerpt at the beginning of this article represents this type of textual dialogue. Finally, the author often enters the text as a participant, not only to help move the story along but to reveal a "human side to the discourse" (Tierney, 1997, p. 27).

The challenge underlying these imbedded textual identities is that they imply a stable narrator who simply enters the field, gathers and analyzes the data, and then reports the findings. The author's role in constructing reality is revealed as unproblematic and is often expunged from the text. The co-constructed nature of life history research requires a more deliberate strategy of not only revealing the voice of the respondent but of acknowledging and accepting a second voice in the text—that of the author. If consumers of life history research are to develop meaning and form judgments based on an interpretation of the text as it is viewed through their own realities, then the researcher must problematize "the privileged authorial perspective" (Webster, 1983, p. 195) most commonly found in social science research. Life histories demand a higher degree of authorial representation in the text because, at a fundamental methodological level, it is a journey of discovery between two individuals, the researcher and the respondent. It cannot be my story of his or her story, but rather *our* story revealed as a way to challenge existing assumptions and to document the interactions between experienced lives and the institutional and societal contexts in which they are lived.

Conclusion

Kouritzin (2000) identified several potential benefits of using life histories in organizational research. Applied to the study of libraries and librarianship, these benefits may include the following:

1. *Revealing the mundane.* Life histories allow perceptions about ordinary lives to become less ordinary. Life histories can be collected from individuals whose stories have not been documented before and, as a consequence, were never included in prior assessments of services and programs.
2. *Informing theoretical assumptions.* Life history research not only enriches general understanding but provides singular examples of experienced lives that may not fit within assumed theories concerning the relationship between people and organizations.
3. *Reinterpreting new knowledge.* Life histories are comprehensive and detailed. This feature means that the data about the lives of respondents can be revisited and reinterpreted as new knowledge or new theories are discovered.
4. *Developing contextual clarity.* Life histories are contextualized and historically grounded. This allows the reader to interpret policy decisions in human terms instead of framed only within economic, legal, or other research terms.
5. *Enhancing subjective awareness of others.* Life histories possess a literary and rhetorical style that makes them accessible to a wide audience and, as such, they help facilitate better understanding about "the untidy complexity of human decision making" (Gmelch, 1992, p. 38).

Life history as a research methodology also benefits the respondent and the researcher. For the respondent, the research process creates an opportunity to be listened to, perhaps for the first time, and a means for understanding and recognizing moments of experiencing adversity. Life history studies benefit the researcher, according to Kouritzin (2000), because they force the researcher to try to understand and then represent an emic perspective of social constructs. Life history research also creates opportunities to illuminate shared understandings about critical issues and events.

The research question underlying a study should always govern the choice of method used for analysis. Although life history research challenges conventional notions of what may be considered useful knowledge in assessing libraries and library practice, it requires a significant commitment of time on the part of both the researcher and the respondent. In addition, because the intention of a life history study is to develop a detailed profile of the experienced lives of others, a large volume of data is generated from the research process. Synthesizing this data into a cogent set of recommendations or guidelines for best practice requires a significant commitment by the researcher of both time and resources. Finally, it should be noted that,

for the academic librarian acting as practitioner-researcher, working with a college or university institutional review board (IRB) can be intimidating. The purpose of these boards is to ensure that the research complies with various federal laws intended to protect human participants from harm. The potential challenge of presenting qualitative research proposals before an IRB have been well documented (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004) and indicates the possibility that life history researchers must be prepared to justify in greater detail their chosen method of research than others relying on more conventional approaches.

Despite these challenges, life history research studies can reveal important new ways of understanding the relationships between libraries and the people who use them. Although there is recognition within the profession that applying qualitative research methods to the study of libraries and their users has value (see, for example, Bates, 2004; Dewdney & Harris, 1992; Fidel, 1993; Sutton, 1993; Westbrook, 1994), creative use of qualitative methods is not significant compared to that found in other applied social science disciplines. However, qualitative research, with its emphasis on understanding complex, interrelated, and dynamic phenomena, is particularly relevant to investigating the contextual features of contemporary libraries and librarianship. An important value of using qualitative research methods is that it provides a way to incorporate meaning as well as measurement into the way we understand library organizations and user behavior. I am not arguing that the use of life histories and other forms of qualitative inquiry replace prevailing positivistic and so-called evidence-based research methodologies. To do so would only encourage dichotomous debates about qualitative versus quantitative research paradigms. These discussions have little value in helping to address the problem of linking research and practice. However, expanding the application of qualitative research methods to the study of problems in librarianship will help challenge accepted conceptualizations of what has been defined traditionally as evidence in professional practitioner-research.

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