

Using biographical methods in social research, by B. Merrill and L. West, London, Sage, 2009, 224 pp., £23.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781412929585

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This book may be for you if, like me, you have ever found yourself profoundly alienated from positivist notions of research, whilst at the same time being fascinated by the complex and vibrant stories you hear, and also the stories these encounters bring forth in you. Barbara Merrill and Linden West are concerned with the question of how biographical interviewing can be best used as a source of knowledge generation in social research. This text positions the biographical genre as offering particular insight into the production of selfhood seen as a dynamic interplay between social structure and individual lives. Creating meaningful and critical biographies of ourselves and others for the purposes of social research makes particular demands of the researcher in terms of skills, theoretical resources and capacity for reflexivity, and Merrill and West set out to plot this complex terrain in this book.

Merrill and West take as a starting point the notion that as researchers we cannot 'write stories of others without reflecting our own histories' (p. 5). I come to this book as someone who struggles with my own researcher identity. The available discourses of research, with their perceived emphasis on objectivity and rationality, often seem to me to negate the values I bring to my work as an adult educator and counsellor. It is exciting and liberating to be offered guidelines as to how practitioners in human development disciplines, who often listen to others' stories for a living, can come to see such storytelling and gathering as research.

The first three chapters situate biographical research methods within a history and a context. Historically these methods have developed out of the narrative turn in the social sciences that seeks to honour and include subjectivities as a legitimate and necessary aspect of the research process. Doing so entails creating and using research methods that tap into, record and theorise complex processes of both subjectification and agency. The authors offer insight into the significance of the book in their own biographies while also situating biographical methods in the context of oral history, feminist research methods and the Chicago school among others, including the disciplines of psychology, sociology and adult education. Merrill and West further situate themselves in the book by drawing on their own autobiographically located theoretical repertoires to illustrate the key role that theory has in allowing biographical research to be made meaningful. There is a full and clear presentation of key theoretical perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, object relations theory, feminism and critical theory.

In each chapter case examples are given, such as the longitudinal study West did of the Sure Start programme and studies of adults returning to learning that Merrill conducted. In addition there is one full chapter devoted to presenting extracts from a variety of research projects. These examples are used to illustrate and illuminate the complexity of researching lives over time, together with the murky but fertile component of the researchers' own reflexivity and the role it plays in presenting and interpreting this research. Interdisciplinarity as a value in biographical research methodology is represented strongly here and other examples from a wide range of

settings are included, such as the fields of criminology, medicine, and lifelong learning. The theme of silenced stories and the concern to offer voice and perspective, informed by a collaborative ethos, to marginalised groups is consistently held, as is the complex terrain of the struggle for resistance and agency in the face of coercive social forces.

The second half of the book offers practical guidance aimed at researchers at all levels, but predominantly post-graduate and practitioner-researcher levels. Help is offered for choosing a research project and considering issues of selfhood and motivation in that choice. The art of narrowing broad concerns to identifiable questions is set out practically, and issues of sampling, preparation, interviewing and analysis of biographical data are each treated clearly with reference to a breadth of relevant methodological literature. However, the book eschews overly instrumentalist or prescriptive approaches to interviewing, analysis and writing, and instead challenges researchers to think creatively about the possibilities that biographical interviewing, interpretation and composition present for creating empowering spaces for meaning making. Ethical issues are sensitively and perceptively dealt with too, again with the benefit of multiple vignettes from experience together with practical guidance on key principles based on a view of the participant as 'a knowing, creative, living subject, like ourselves, demanding fundamental respect' (p. 177).

As I write this review I am nearing the end of doctoral research that includes significant auto/biographical and reflexive research methods. Research of this kind is demanding and challenging, but also enlivening and potentially transformative, for both researcher and research participants. This book offers sound advice of a kind that I have needed in my own writing. In particular I have drawn comfort from the authors' strong and clear theoretical and epistemological positionings on biographical research and what it can offer in the contest of academic and funded research.

I have already recommended this book to research students I work with in the fields of counselling and career guidance. On the basis of reading it for this review, I will happily do so in the future. If they consult it, as some have, they will find there a rich, theoretically sophisticated and yet accessible guide to incorporating biographical perspectives into their research. However, it is important to note that this approach to research does not lend itself to an easy-to-follow formula. Readers, as is right and proper, will still need to work hard at the often messy business of understanding and engaging with complex issues of self and narrative in social research. They will find in this book many practical, methodological and theoretical resources to help them on their way.

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Reflective practice: writing and professional development (3rd ed.), by G.E.J. Bolton, London, Sage, 2010, 304 pp., £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781848602120

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This book broadens and deepens the reader's understanding of reflective practice generally while focusing its 15 chapters on reflective writing and its potential role in