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perceive this risk to be significant. Reasons for this are diverse: they may lack information about the risk; through past experience and local knowledge their perception of their coping ability may outweigh perceived risk; acknowledging the risk may have negative impacts (psychological and/or economic); or they may distrust the flood maps.

So, while there is value in identifying those 'at risk' to target awareness campaigns or to explore the environmental justice agenda, it must also be recognised that vulnerability is a quality of experience and produces different responses in different individuals. Rather than regard emic and etic perspectives as competing versions, complex social phenomena require coordination of the perspectives and their associated methodologies. The principal social science tool enabling such an approach is a mixed-method design that assigns different roles to different methods.

THE STANDING, USES AND FUTURE OF METHODOLOGICAL COMBINATION

The contemporary practice of multiple-method research

The status of MMRD contrasts in the academic and applied research spheres. MMRD remains controversial in the academic sphere. Since the canonical formulation of 'triangulation' in the 1950s, the social sciences have developed a range of considered objections on grounds of epistemology and incompatibility of methods. The situation contrasts with that in applied research, where many regard MMRD as a practical necessity. Bryman (2005) compared planned research design and actual practice in studies claiming MMRD, finding substantial divergence from the kind of planned use of MMRD that we might expect if the concept of MMRD was firmly established as part of the methodological canon. Researchers sometimes employed multiple methods without any rationale for why this was superior to using a single method; other researchers who declared such a rationale did not use multiple methods in the study itself, and yet other researchers who declared both a rationale and followed it through by using multiple methods actually relied on a single method for their analysis. These divergences reflect the fact that MMRD is not a technique, like calculating tests of significance or running a cross tabulation, but an attitude of mind, an approach to quality standards and to what constitutes adequate explanations of social phenomena.

The policy community - government, voluntary organisations and interest groups - is a growing consumer of social science research. In the UK and USA those engaged in commissioning research have increasingly construed adequate research as multiple-method research. At root, MMRD is a growing orthodoxy because of the 'common sense' appeal of the underlying logic (combined with either a measure of ignorance or indifference to the epistemological differences between methods), but the trend is also related to the increasing promotion of 'evidence-based policy', which has engendered significant institutional moves towards standardisation of research methods, manifest in professional reviews of research capacity, such as the Rhrid Report in the UK (2003).

To overcome what are regarded as the constraints on the representativeness and generalisability of qualitative research, government has initiated both topic-specific reviews of quality standards for research (such as in health) and generic reviews of quality standards for particular methods, such as qualitative research (e.g. the Spenor Review for the UK's Cabinet Office; Spenor et al., 2003). Such reviews tend to result in checklists of ingredients for reliable and valid research, and are uncomfortable reading for those who do not construe social research as a matter of following recipes, but there is no doubting the significance of such developments. In particular, qualitative research may have 'arrived', but it is welcome at the platform only provided its findings can be associated with findings from research using other methods.

Long before checklists emerged for qualitative research they were already a familiar part of the environment for quantitative researchers. Criteria in that area reflect the tidier characteristics of quantitative methodology and benefit from the benchmark standards that are intrinsic to work with statistical data, such as expected sample sizes, accepted tests of association and standard measures of effect size. So the checklist approach emerged earlier in relation to quantitative research and attracted less controversy. A major application of large-scale quantitative research is to health research and much of the heuristic associated with quality standards for quantitative research was laid down in the context of epidemiological research, which is associated with large samples and experimental-control designs.

This approach is sufficiently embedded in the apparatus of policy-making that it has taken institutional form in organisations like the 'Campbell collaboration' in criminal justice and the 'Cochrane collaboration' in health. Membership represents a kind of official seal of approval to conduct research in this area and members must produce research that adheres to inflexible quality standards.

Ill-considered multiple-method research can lead to real methodological traps. We might take an example from the health field, concerning the UK controversy over the MMR vaccines. The 'Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine, a combined vaccination against common childhood diseases. A small sample study conducted by a medical researcher suggested a link between the vaccine and autism, and received considerable publicity. During the 1990s parental resistance to MMR vaccination grew, and many parents demanded that the National Health Service instead provide single vaccines against the various diseases. Other parents refused all vaccination. Both forms of parental resistance increased the incidence of the diseases. Health policy researchers were asked to address these problems. They wanted to add qualitative understanding to epidemiological and survey data. They proposed a "meta-analysis" of qualitative studies. Initially their idea was to simply add together the samples from a number of qualitative studies of parental resistance until they had what they regarded as a large enough sample size from which to draw inferences. These researchers had no direct expertise in qualitative research. Their background was in epidemiology. It had to be explained that simply adding 'together' a cluster of qualitative studies would be to ignore the different modes of eliciting parental views, different analytic techniques, different degrees of experience of vaccination amongst the respondents and so on. 'Adding together' would do little more than multiply error.

Technological transformations

While the institutional frames within which multiple-method research is conducted cast a strong influence over what is understood as legitimate methodological practice, social research methodology is also responsive to new techniques, particularly those emerging from the informational field. In this section we consider some current and potential 'transformative technologies' for their potential impact on the future of multiple-method research.

A recent means of interrelating qualitative and quantitative data that embraces Caracelli and Green's integrated approach has emerged largely by stealth. This is the development of quantification routines within computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS). Most qualitative software counts 'hits' from specified retrievals (e.g. all single female interviewees who commented on divorce), and encourages triangulation by offering a portal to export data to SPSS and import quantitative data tables. Some argue that such facilities represent a hybrid methodology transcending the qualitative/quantitative distinction (Bazeley 1999; Bourdon 2000). These claims relate to software that enables statistical information to be imported into qualitative databases and used to inform coding of text, with coded information then being exported to statistical
victims following the Autumn 2001 floods. Phase 2 consisted of two qualitative components: focus group discussions and individual interviews. While the focus groups concentrated on public understanding and interpretation of the Environment Agency’s warning codes, the in-depth interviews explored how individuals said they would act in response to warnings. Another important difference was that while focus groups largely rely on the interaction between group members and a shared experience, the individual interviews were conducted in respondents’ own homes, with the potential to provide situational cues prompting responses. In the final phase, the survey used a questionnaire instrument developed from the responses obtained in phases 1 and 2. This was designed, using hypothetical flood scenarios, to establish how the public would respond to flood warning in the event of an emergency.

Note that the conventional sequence of pilot qualitative work enabling design of a survey instrument is here augmented by preliminary secondary analysis, and that the qualitative components were in two modes chosen because group discussions were thought best able to access people’s thinking about the issue while action was thought most reliably to be accessed by interviewing individuals.

**Identification of risky places and risky people**

The EA projects had multiple aims and outcomes but centrally depended upon the identification of risky places and risky people. Respondents were defined as those ‘at risk’ from tidal or fluvial flooding but who may never have actually experienced a flood event. The study’s multiple-method design enabled us to negotiate the controversies associated with identifying this population and their understanding of their risk. The ‘at risk’ samples were identified by the use of flood plain maps. It may seem obvious that residents within the flood plains are most at risk from flooding but measuring the extent of the flood plains and quantifying the likelihood of floods is a contentious exercise exacerbated by many factors ranging from climate change to the involvement of the insurance industry.

The EA maps identified the ‘risky places’ but were also used to identify the ‘at risk’ population living within them. Thus the quantitative data was used to define the sample for subsequent qualitative and quantitative analyses, exemplifying a ‘development’ strategy in research design (Green et al., 1989). This ‘at risk’ population was then targeted by the EA ‘awareness campaigns’ designed to educate the vulnerable public about flood facts. A potential five million people and two million homes and businesses were targeted. However, the flood maps were an etic, outsider measure of those at risk and recognition of their risk by those affected was clearly important for appropriate public action in preparation for any future disaster. This dichotomy of meaning and measurement, in terms of outsider (etic) and insider (emic) perspectives, will now be discussed.

**Emic and etic conceptualisation of vulnerability**

A useful conceptual framework for thinking about vulnerability to flood is in terms of ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ approaches (see Spiers 2000; Fielding and Moran-ellis 2005). These concepts, re-interpreted from linguistics and anthropology, refer to two complementary perspectives. The etic perspective represents the ‘outsider’ viewpoint and the emic an ‘insider’ viewpoint. Pike (1967) linked emic and etic linguistic analysis to emic and etic perspectives on human behaviour, developing a methodology for cross-cultural comparisons. Pike regards emic and etic perspectives as being like the two images of a matching stereoscopic view. They may initially look alike but on close inspection are different, and, when combined, give a ‘startling’ and ‘tri-dimensional understanding’ of human behavior instead of a ‘flat’ one (Pike 1967: 41). The payoff from combination is key: ‘emic and etic data do not constitute a rigid dichotomy of data, but often present the same data from two points of view’ (ibid).

An etic viewpoint defines vulnerable individuals as those at greater risk based either on where they live (in vulnerable places) or on demographic characteristics (vulnerable people). These characteristics are usually seen as those which increase social dependence; i.e. old age, ill-health, disability and ethnicity (due to language barriers). Qualitative methods are nearly always used to identify vulnerable places (measuring the likelihood of an event occurring) and are also often used to identify vulnerable people. One negative consequence of this approach is that individuals may become stereotyped based on their defining functional ‘deficit’. Another problem is that such defined ‘vulnerable groups’ are not homogenous.

In contrast, an emic viewpoint seeks to identify vulnerability on the basis of meanings held by individuals arising from their lived experience and tends to be aligned with qualitative methodology. Emic vulnerability is founded on a person’s family’s/community’s sense of their own resilience and ability to respond in the face of a flood. Emic vulnerability can only be determined by the person experiencing it. So, a person who may be defined as belonging to an at-risk group (emic vulnerability) may only feel vulnerable if they consider some threat to their self to exceed their capacity to adequately respond, despite ‘rationally’ acknowledging their possession of vulnerable characteristics. They need to recognise that they are at risk before they can effectively prepare.

**Public awareness of risk**

Quantitative analysis of the ‘at risk’ population based on a survey administered in 2001 (Fielding et al., 2005) and more recently reported by the EA1, where 49 percent of residential respondents (41 percent in 2005) were not aware that their property was in a flood risk area, made it clear that the EA’s message was not getting through. Nearly half those defined as ‘at risk’ were not aware of their risk. Thus, while the quantitative measurement of the extent of the flood plains had been used to identify the ‘at risk’ population, other qualitative analysis identified a differing perception of reality. The imposed, outsider view defining risky places was at odds with the lived experience of those defined ‘at risk’. The fact that
illuminating as their points of agreement. Triangulation helps address the tendency to focus on data fitting preconceptions or that is conspicuous at the expense of less exotic, but possibly more indicative, data. While the rigidity of quantitative methods helps researchers resist such faults, their work is not immune to such problems either. However, such faults can more readily be traced because quantitative methodologies necessitate clarity about hypotheses, make the researcher’s assumptions more explicit and sediment these assumptions in research instruments that cannot generally be adjusted after they are deployed. Deploying qualitative methods alongside quantitative methods in multiple-method research designs helps qualitative research gain some of these benefits. Similarly, it can bring to quantitative elements of the research more refinement and analytic depth.

From convergent validation to the celebration of diversity

As well as taking a convergent validation perspective, the original literature on combining methods usually involved one method taking precedence (Creswell 2003). Qualitative components rarely held this role and were mostly used for pilot work or follow-up with a sub-sample. More recent approaches suggest more even-handed combinations, as in Caracelli and Green’s (1997) classification of mixed-method research into component designs (such as ‘complementary’ or ‘comparative’ designs) and integrated designs, which include iterative designs, nested designs and holistic designs. Caracelli and Green (1997) identify four different strategies through which qualitative and quantitative data might be integrated. The first, data transformation, requires data of one type being converted into that of another so they may be analysed together. Typological development, the second strategy, involves the use of conceptual categories emergent from the analysis of one type of data to the analysis of a contrasting data type. Third, extreme case analysis requires the researcher to focus on exceptional examples found in one type of data and refine their explanation of it via analysis of data of another type. The final strategy, data consolidation, extends the data transformation strategy in that data are converted into another form, but the emphasis is on assimilating multiple forms of data to produce a new dataset.

These strategies enable numerous types of multiple method research design. Green et al. (1989) identified six main dimensions of methodological design. When combining two methods the nature of the relationship between the methods can be categorised along each dimension (see Figure 33.1). Thus, combining a survey with qualitative interviewing – two distinct methods – can be categorised as using different paradigms, as the experts can explore different aspects of the same phenomenon, in sequence (e.g. first the survey, then the interviews); with the methods being independent but with each method having equal status.

Moreover, the research designs must be distinguished from the reported rationale or practical purpose of the research (see Table 33.1).

Other attempts at definitive typologies arrive at different numbers of main types of methodological combination (Creswell 2003; Nikolov 2004; Tabachnik and Teddlie 1998), some of which proliferate to the point of intellectual indigestion (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The most expansive typology can never capture all potential combinations; the essential thing is having a considered but open stance in deriving a design that captures the research question. Over-concentration on choosing exactly the right permutation at the outset can make for an unhelpfully rigid approach, but this is not to sideline preliminary reflection. Rather, it is to say that precisely specifying the research question is the key thing, and from this a sense of the best methodological combination will emerge, with the proviso that researchers must always be ready to adjust the design in light of what is found. Research design is not a stage, it is a process.

Broadly, strategies for interrelating findings from multiple methods fall into two types: ‘combination’ and ‘conversion’ (Bazeley 2006). An instance of combination is when categorical or continuous variables are the basis both of statistical analysis and for comparison of coded qualitative data. Textual and numerical data may have been collected together, as where questionnaires mix fixed and open response items, or in sequence, such as where surveys are followed by interviews. Conversion involves changing one type of data to another, such as where the coding applied to qualitative data is used in statistical analysis, or where quantitative data contributes to narrative analyses or a life history (Elliott 2005). Bazeley (2006) notes that strategies involving the consolidation, blending or merging of data tend to involve both conversion and combination.

A well-established case for inter-relating quantitative and qualitative methods is that the qualitative element can suggest types of adaptation or experience for which the quantitative element can then test, thus enabling conclusions concerning the statistical frequency of types in a population. Qualitative research is good at identifying types but is seldom sufficiently comprehensive to indicate for what share of the sample a given type...
Synergy and Synthesis: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Jane Fielding and Nigel Fielding

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES ON METHODOLOGICAL INTER-RELATION

The origins of multiple-method research

Research designs systematically relating multiple methods originated in the context of mainstream psychology (Campbell and Fiske 1959), initially being termed ‘triangulation’. Multiple method research designs (‘MMRD’) remain prominent amongst mainstream methodological practices (Campbell and Russo 1999). Heuristics for relating results from substantially different methods were a theme from the outset. Campbell wrote that, when he decided to study psychology, while working on a turkey ranch for the summer, ‘my notion of science was already of the experimental physics sort, whereas [a magazine article that inspired his choice of discipline] was solely about humanistic psychology’ (Campbell 1981: 456). Discussing his initial elaboration of triangulation by way of the ‘multitrait-multimethod matrix’ technique, Campbell wrote that it grew from lectures at Berkeley on measurement artefacts in the study of individual differences. Campbell used correlational matrices crossing different methods in his dissertation and thus had found his way to what he dubbed ‘methodological triangulation’ before his collaboration with Fiske.

The original conception was that triangulation would enhance validity, understood as agreement in the outcomes of more than one independent measurement procedure, relative to studies employing a single procedure. The position assumes that there are realities that exist independently of the observer, that have stable properties that can be measured, and that can be mutually related as the basis of internally consistent explanations of social phenomena. These assumptions are necessary because in relating findings from
CONCLUSION

The three biographical methods I have discussed in this chapter each have a distinctive approach and, though they share origins in the Chicago School of Sociology, they have developed along rather different interdisciplinary lines. Where the biographical interpretive method lends itself to more psychoanalytic interpretations of motivation and meaning, narrative analysis leans more towards sociolinguistics, while oral history draws across both sociology and history. Each gives centrality to the individual account in attempting to explain the changing nature and persistence of social relations and social structures. While each makes use of the interview to generate data, only oral history continues to focus on the dynamics of the interview through the process of interpretation and discussion. I have admitted a partisan position in my relationship with oral history but that is not to ignore the contribution of the other two approaches. In looking for ways to pin down the process of interrogating the data they force us to pay attention to explaining our thinking and analytical procedures, highlighting the detail which a phenomenological approach demands. My only concern is that in doing so we risk an over-interpretation which rather than emphasising the qualities of the original teller, eclipses them and puts the interpreter in a position of authority and control.

REFERENCES

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NOTES

1 Fieldwork training for some trainee sociologists in the 1960s involved making notes after the interview or observation. Taping was usually frowned on as a poor substitute for skills in observation and recall (Graham Fennell, personal communication).
2 Margot Jefferys Interview number 306, deposited at the British Library Sound Archive.
and on the basis of these selected the three approaches I've just been outlining from amongst all those which come under the heading: 'biographical'. The themes were: interactivity, subjectivity and structuring and context.

Before I go on to look at some differences between the three approaches, with the aid of these themes, I want to consider what are the innovative and creative contributions of the biographical interpretive method, oral history and narrative analysis to social research methods generally. In my view, each approach highlights the interview as an example of social interaction in ways that draw on ideas of reflexivity and with reference to the significance of difference, each foregrounds the subjectivity, expressed feelings and meanings of the respondent, interviewee or subject. Yet for each, the structuring of the dialogue through the disciplinary antecedents of the particular approach is methodologically relevant. Finally, context, remembered, observed, researched, told and immediate, plays a significant role in each of the three methods. All of them, part of the 'biographical turn' in social science, are in different ways positioned within the shifting boundaries between history and sociology ... (and there) what some of the most telling and stimulating debating issues have emerged (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 3).

**The interview as interrogative**

To argue that the interview, the most typical source of biographical data is interrogative may appear to be a statement of the obvious (Bornt, 1994). After all, an interview involves questioning and the soliciting of answers, most effectively between two people though occasionally more. Why emphasise its obvious interrogative qualities? My reason for doing so is to draw attention to the dialogic qualities of an interview, to the significance of the relationship which develops, and to emphasise the intentions and perspective of the interviewee.

The approach taken in biographical interpretation is to use an initial question, and then to stand back, as it were. Having posed that initial question, where interest in a particular topic is expressed, the interviewee in the biographical and interpretive interview is then left to relate a life narrative, as far as is possible without interruption. A second phase then follows in which questions are asked as a means to expanding on themes, to clarify points made or to ask for more detail about aspects of the life portrayed in the narrative.

In the oral history interview in contrast questioning drives the dialogue along in a quite deliberate way. As Ken Plummer argues, oral history and life history interviews draw on ‘researched and solicited stories ... (which) do not naturally occur in everyday life; rather they have to be seduced, coaxed and interrogated out of subjects’ (Plummer, 2001, p. 28). The questioning and answering builds on itself, so that the interviewees have the complex task of listening while questioning, holding at least two, sometimes more, foci of interests, as the interviewees pursues their own story, sometimes surprised at what they have remembered or have found themselves saying in response to a question or opportunity to reflect. While the topic of the oral history interview will have been clear initially it is never possible to be certain how it will turn out as the dialogue develops.

I'll illustrate this with an excerpt from an interview I carried out in the early 1990s with Pat Hanlon (1915–1998), a well-known UK cyclist when I interviewed her and four other women for an edited collection of writing on older women (Bornt, 1993). I invited her to tell me her life story, as a cyclist and businesswoman (unusually for the cycling world she ran her own shop). She began with an unbroken account of her early years as a cyclist, replete with technical terms related to cycle racing and bike parts. I was keen to guide her towards talking more about the social world of cycling and took this opportunity with a question about her first husband:

So was your first husband a cyclist as well?

Yes, he was a cyclist, yes. But he used to go out with another club. We didn't go out with our club, because there wasn't any women in that club. I used to go out with the Aetonia CC ... But I also belonged to the Clarion, which was a union all over the country, the Clarion were. Supposed to be Labour club, but it was a labour club. Because they used to threaten to throw me out all the time, because I used to -- didn't agree with what they said. You know, you're supposed to be Labour, you know, and half of them were communists. They used to go preaching down on the Docking, on the hills and things like that. And I thought, I mean, waiting my time down there, you know, with that lot! So I used to go out on my own then.

Were they strict then, about that?

They were very strict about whether you were Labour or not, yes. Because if the heads there found you talking about you were -- I mean, I wasn't anything really, but I used to annoy them, you know, when I said, I'm not Labour, I don't want to be Labour and all this. And they used to get so annoyed. And they said, well, we're going to get you chucked out, you know. I says, I don't care, you know. But, er, they never did.

I supposed cycling was, it was quite a kind of what you might call a more working-class sort of leisure thing.

It was mostly, yes, oh yes, mostly people, I mean, there was never a car on the road when you raced. Only the time-keeper was the only car. I mean if you looked for the car, that was the start of your race ... And they'd all be people who would be, what 'working week, like you, and spending all their weekends --

Oh yes, there was, oh, it took years and years for wealthy people to start cycling. Their sons night cycle, and they used to come on in there big cars, you know, and watch their son racing. But that kind of thing didn't happen for years and years.
to the bigger picture, be it childbirth, war, schooling or sexualuity? This may indeed be the case; however, by structuring, I mean the idea that the methods used rely on some kind of prior theorising or framework of ideas as the part of the researcher. This is not to rule out informal structuring or the kind of everyday theorising people develop in order to explain their lives but for my purposes here to emphasise the contribution which the theorising and methods of particular disciplines, such as psychology, sociology or history make to the generation of the data. So, I would exclude storytelling and autobiography from this particular category.

Finally, context; by this I mean the ways in which an individual account, or set of accounts, is given meaning by its own framework of time and space and by those of the researcher and interpreter of the data. Context is not only to be seen in terms of setting or the historical time or social and political structures surrounding a particular account; it also includes the agency and agendas of researcher and researched, their biographical time. Autobiography and storytelling fit less well once again. Where the main source is the single-authored account generated independently for an audience, rather than with another, context has fewer dimensions for exploration.

The burgeoning of interest in the perspective of the individual, in what has been described as a more ‘humanistic’ approach in sociological research has resulted in review articles and books which in their different ways have helpfully sketched out origins and developments in work with biography (Plummer, 2001; Thompson, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Seale et al., 2004; Thomson, 2007). This is an exciting area in which to work. Biographical work engages with many of the most telling and enduring epistemological and methodological issues in the human sciences taking in debates on validity, memory, subjectivity, standpoint, ethics, voice and representivity amongst others (Chamberlayne et al., 2000, p. 3).

The three methods I have chosen to concentrate on have shared antecedents in most respects, but with some individual differences which show the distinctiveness of each. In what follows I draw on several of the works cited above where these lineages and identities are drawn out. A familiar starting point is the group of sociologists known as the ‘Chicago School’ and their work in the first 40 years of the twentieth century. The focus on the collection of direct testimony and on observation under realistic conditions led to methodological innovation in a number of areas. Urban society came under scrutiny, with studies of poverty, street gangs, and high life. Alongside this strongly engaged and situated commitment came a new development in social psychology. Herbert Mead’s idea of ‘the self’ (1934) stressed the significance of language, culture and non-verbal communication, with its focus on social interaction and reflection in the development of the individual’s sense of who they are. His notion of the self as having its own meaning and sense of reality, identifiable and recognisable in relation to social or historical context, provided a challenge to arguments which gave primacy to the investigator’s or commentator’s perspective. Students, teachers and researchers associated with the Chicago School were to generate some of the most influential developments in sociology, amongst these were symbolic interactionism (Plummer, 1991) and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968).

It is with this background in mind that I now go on to take a closer look at the first of the three methods I identified under the biographical ‘umbrella’: the biographical interpretive method.

Biographical interpretive method

Fritz Schütze, a sociologist writing in Germany in the 1980s is usually credited with the originating work which led to the development of the biographical interpretive method. He was greatly influential by ‘third generation Chicagoans’ such as Anselm Strauss, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman and others (Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000, p. 38). The interview method and its subsequent analysis which he developed and which has been further refined by Gabriele Rosenthal (2004), who followed his theoretical and methodological lead, requires the separating out of the chronological story from the experiences and meanings which interviewees provide. The process depends on an understanding of the biographical interview as a process in which movement between past, present and future is constant and in which the interviewee may not be fully aware of contexts and influences in their life.

Rosenthal and her erstwhile collaborator Wolfgang Fischer, developed this approach into what is now usually known as ‘biographical interpretive analysis’ or ‘biographic narrative interpretive analysis’ (Wengraf, 2001). She had been interested in explaining work and life ethics in post World War II West German society being convinced that the sense which people made of their lives under the Third Reich played a central role (Rosenthal, 2006, p. 29). Since Rosenthal and Fischer’s early development, the method has been given much more elaborated treatment, using individual case-study analysis, based on interview transcripts, by Prue Chamberlayne and colleagues. Their particular interest has been to theorise and explain the impact of social welfare policies through embracing the subjectivity and agency of welfare recipients, linking private and public spheres, as these are experienced, expressed and represented through individual accounts (Chamberlayne & King, 2000; Chamberlayne et al., 2000, 2004).

The systematisation inherent in this approach requires the elaborate codification of the interview in such a way as to identify themes, having separated out the ‘lived life’ from the ‘told story’ in the transcribed interview (Wengraf, 2001, p. 23). This distinction separates the chronological sequence of the events of a life from the way that the story is told. By identifying how someone relates to their story, in the telling, labelling text segments as to whether they are descriptive, argumentative, reporting, narrative or evaluative, biographical interpretive analysis addresses the qualitative data with hypotheses which draw on significant segments of text. Wengraf (2001) details the procedure for interpreting biographical data, showing with a detailed account, how hypotheses are arrived at and then worked through, as the life story is explored. Life events, as told by the interviewee, are looked at and hypotheses and counter hypotheses drawn up and explored, preferably by groups of people working together, as to likely effects on someone’s later life.

This phenomenological approach to understanding biographical data focuses on the individual’s perspective within an observable and knowable historical and structural context, and what it is like to be the person describing their lives and the various decisions, turns and patterns of that life (Wengraf, 2001, pp. 305–6).

At one level what Wengraf is describing is a complex process of interpretation, a shared and carefully documented practice of searching for themes in data typical of a grounded theory approach (Wengraf, 2001, p. 280). However, at quite another level the analysis expects a deep level of explanation and interpretation, one which looks for hidden and explicit meanings in the transcript. Just how this differs from the other two approaches I’ve identified, I will come back to this later in this chapter.

Oral history’s distinctive characteristic is its use of sociological approaches to data generation and analysis in what is an historical pursuit. Even though the development of the interview as a tool of investigation has a much longer history, the significance of the Chicago School, as Paul Thompson points out in his seminal text, The Voice of the Past, was its effect on the idea of the life history (2000). The interview became more than simply extraction of information around specific topics; it became an object in itself with shape and totality given by the individual’s told life events.

In an early essay, the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, argues ‘What makes oral history different’. Having identified oral history’s particular qualities as ‘the orality