

Book review

Clough, P., Goodley, D., Lawthom, R. and Moore, M. 2004: *Researching life stories. Method, theory and analyses in a biographical age*. London: Routledge Falmer. 224 pp. £24.99 paper, £80 cloth.

The authors of this book advocate the value of 'storytelling', and aim to critically and pragmatically reflect upon the use of life stories in social and educational research. This aim is undoubtedly achieved. The text is organized around four 'real life' stories and takes the reader through the research process, exploring the theoretical frameworks and methodologies that can be used in researching life stories and the analysis of those stories. Also considered are some of the ethical aspects inherent in using life stories in research and how these stories can impact upon the development of policy, practice, and theory.

In Part 1, the authors present the life stories which are the focus of the text, inviting the reader to engage with these before looking at any of the other chapters. The stories are written in different narrative styles and as such begin to demonstrate in themselves the possibilities of using life stories in research. In Part 2, the authors move on to the 'doing' of life story research, using the stories presented to explore aspects of access to and relationships with informants, ethics, and how the life stories were written. They also discuss, in an accessible and coherent manner, the relationship between epistemology, methodology, and method. Part 3 is concerned with the analysis of the life stories and presents four different approaches, again linking this back to the underpinning epistemological issues in a helpful way. The authors stated that they had considered analysing each others life stories in order to demonstrate the different interpretations of their analytical approaches: this would indeed have been interesting and informative and would have aided understanding further. The chapter on reflexivity examines many issues important to those engaged in qualitative research in general

and underlines the important point that in their analyses the authors are offering an *interpretation* of what they see. Finally, in Part 4, the authors consider the teaching of the craft of researching life stories, the audience for life stories, and the possible applications of such research. Again, they use the stories presented at the beginning of the book to illustrate points made.

Throughout the text the authors present complex arguments in an accessible and very readable style. A range of sources are used by the authors to good effect in the text and the reference list provides a useful resource. The use of the four life stories to illustrate and explore different methodological and analytical issues is an engaging device, bringing to life what could otherwise have been rather dry discussion. It does, however, make the book seem a little repetitive, although it is difficult to see how the authors could have addressed this.

The book is aimed at all social science and education researchers at undergraduate and postgraduate level and would be of interest to anybody who wishes to understand individual and social worlds. Each section of the book begins with an introduction describing the material to be covered and each chapter ends with a conclusion drawing together important points to aid the understanding of the reader. However, the text presents a relatively sophisticated level of theoretical thinking which may make it more suitable for the postgraduate market.

Overall, this is a very readable book which covers a lot of material, managing to combine practical advice about researching life stories with an exploration of conceptual underpinnings. It will be useful to those new to the idea of life story research, but also to those with more experience in the field.

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