



THE NEW CONCEPT DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCHING METHOD

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Abstract

The applied range of biographical researching method is quite broad, including sociology, anthropology, history, ethnology and pedagogy. It is developing in the same pattern and trend with contemporary cultural studies. Its main types contain researching and collecting data from autobiography, biography, life history, oral history, narrative inquiry. One important and effective way of its implementation is to use the biographical narration. It is necessary to do some differentiation and analysis between biographical research method and ethnographic methods, in order to make use of them better.

Keywords: *biographical researching method; narration; biographies.*



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In the current academia, the study of culture has become the development direction of the humanities with the increasingly blurred boundaries and the growing comprehensive awareness among disciplines. The features of multi-angle observation and a full range of methodology of anthropology, which belongs to humanities, are decided by its interdisciplinary nature, which means the methods may be different for different studies,

and the method does not necessarily have to be the same when the researching objects are the same. Therefore, it is inadequate to apply any method in rigid way without a flexible approach of taking scope and objects of research into account.

Among all the traditional and modern social science researching methods, the biographical researching method is neither a new researching faction, nor a method or discipline limited to the academic field or social science. Its applied range is quite broad, including sociology, anthropology, history, ethnology and pedagogy (Sun & Li, 2003). Its development has been in the same pattern and trend with contemporary cultural studies. Because of the failure of explanation of details of social reality just only by the method of representation with text, there is the crisis of traditional social researching method and a transition process of theory has been triggered (Song, Zhang & Wang, 2014). In this way, the importance and effectiveness of biographical researching method have been paid attention to and its advantages have been explored with frequent practices.

The brief introduction of biography research

This method is mainly focusing on the biographical experiences during one's living, learning etc. process. Based on the life story, we can just analyze the background, reasons, influencing factors, motivations, thinking, environment and other factors for one's living process. It is therefore possible and easily to dig out the effects and influences from historical, economical, cultural, legal, institutional, demographical, political and other social factors on ordinary social individuals and citizens, in order to compare and improve these factors to promote the living, learning and other standard for normal persons living in the society.

One of the important and effective ways of implementing the biographical researching method is to use the biographical narration to do analysis. The way and mode of the biographical narration seems to be relating with personal opinions and thoughts. The narrator himself could decide which part of his learning or living experiences to narrate and in which way the content of his life world would be expressed. As the narrator would feel free and active of hold the authority in the whole narrating, therefore, he would act as a director of his narration and would narrate which he "likes or dislikes". During the whole narration, these choices of talking materials as "like and dislike" some parts or periods of his life, as well as

the way of talking, such as emphasizing, repeating, stammering, whispering, would imply the narrator's inner world and thoughts on his life, and thus the functions and influences from outer factors would be also embodied by these.

Although there is still doubt about the reliability of narrations of changeable experiences, which seems to be unsteadiness during the whole life process, the narrations are also quite more convincible than any other documents or materials (Alheit, 2015). Firstly, the persons who could experience the same specific living and learning experiences or stories as the narrators are rare, as each one leads a different life from others, and therefore such life has the character of uniqueness (Liu, 1993). Secondly, the narrating stories, which could be remembered and narrated clearly by each narrator, can be seen as meaningful and significant for the narrators themselves. During the long life and learning process, maybe some of memories of changes could be forgotten, and some of such changes may be even the inflection points for the narrators' life (Alheit, 2015), however, when the narrators begin their narration, they can only remember the most important and significant matters or inflections points and changes in their life, which seem to have higher priority than other matters or changes in their life (Liu, 1993).

The main types of biographical researching method

There are many concrete practical researching types and pattern of manifestation of biographical researching method, such as researching and collecting data from autobiography, biography, life history, oral history, narrative inquiry, etc. The connotations and features of them can be seen from the following table (Sun & Li, 2003).

Types	Contents	Features
Autobiography	Individuals their own write texts, compile and publish books about events and experience in the life history. Class research characteristics. The focuses of autobiographical research are the autobiographical ethnography with main organizational cultural affiliation and fragment autobiography with personal cross-section experiences.	Researching objects: narrators themselves; Recorder: narrators themselves; The researching focus: narrators past.
Biography	Researchers do research based on the content of the whole or a part	Researching objects: other individuals;

	someone's life history. The difference with autobiography is the author is not the narrator himself	Recorder: researchers themselves; The researching focus: the past of typical characters Researching objects: other individuals;
Life history	Researchers take advantage of individuals' information or materials collected by interviews or observation, with a long period.	Recorder: researchers themselves; The researching focus: the individuals' life experience. Researching objects: other individuals;
Oral history	Researchers collect materials from one or several individuals for researching, mainly including the interviews' records, recording and files	Recorder: researchers themselves; The researching focus: historical context. Researching objects: other individuals;
Narrative inquiry	Researchers use the methods of observation, interviews to collect materials and transform the field researching results into researching text with ongoing exploration and consultation with participants and interviewees.	Recorder: researchers themselves and others; The researching focus: meaning of the narrative context.

Table 1: The main types of biographical research

The differences and relations between biographical research method and ethnographic methods.

There are also many concepts and notions have similarities and common points with the biographical researching method, such as the ethnography, which is one of the most commonly used methods in cultural anthropology, plays an important role among many branches of anthropology. As a research process, it first requires anthropologists to observe, record, and participate in the daily life of the researching culture carefully, all of which are referred to as the "fieldwork", and the method closely related to this fieldwork is known as the fieldwork method (Zhang, 2002). Therefore, both of these notions have always been confused in the social science researching field. It is necessary to do some differentiation and analysis for them, in order to take use of them with clearer concepts and ideas.

Ethnography, as a result form embodied with text, asks anthropologists describe and indicate the observed phenomenon and culture with detailed records. In the traditional anthropology era, the ethnographic research stressed on the overall concept, and therefore wished to be able to propose a one-size-fits-all theory through research. In other words, they are delusional to find the fundamental regularity of human culture through research. This kind of ethnographic study with such a purpose has been overall questioned and reflected since the 1980s, and the interpretive anthropology was born out along with this reflection (Zhang, 2002).

In order to make a distinction between traditional ethnographic writing, the interpretive anthropology, called its own ethnography as “experimental ethnography” which was open towards all conceptual, formal or stylistic text writing, and extreme tolerant with each experimental text writing. George E. Marcus and M. J. Fischer said: Although some of the texts may be judged as clumsy, unsuccessful, without achieving the setting target, but they might be still interesting and valuable as long as they provide new possibilities to other ethnographers (Zhang, 2002). This kind of full of good intentions and humane attitude is undoubtedly useful for research, because it not only affords confidence to experimenters and researcher, but also more importantly, it inspires the researchers’ enthusiasm and the urge with creation.

Biographical research is neither a new born in the field of social sciences and humanities, but a mixture of history, sociology and literature, nor a new thing compared to ethnography, but a much detailed, further and deepen ethnographic research, that describes the forms of an ethnic group, a community, a society, comprehensively explains individuals living circumstance in depth, and concerns cultural creators, users and owners and their life forms (Pan, 2005, pp243-245). It is born out of the ethnography, but there are differences between them:

(1) Different objects. Ethnography aims at a large range of groups, and cares about all social phenomena existed and still existing in the groups, both tangible and intangible, although which also contains objects for biographical research, however, the approaches and methods of handling with them are different. The ethnography does not deal with only

one biographical object, so each character can only be described briefly under the background of limited space and many characters (Zhang, 2002). On the contrary, the biographical research only targets at one character, therefore the research on him will neither only stay on the surface with simple descriptions, as only recording the name, gender, age, place of origin, specialties, the main contributions, etc., nor separate one's whole life course into various fragments without relations, but descript and interpret the life experiences with a linear narration according to the narrator's life course.

(2) Different methods. Both of ethnographic and biographical research methods are basically the same in the way of accessing to information, as obtaining first-hand research data through fieldwork (also known as field operations) (Pan, 2005, pp243-245). However, ethnography is a kind of collection work based on the establishment of general sampling data of a regional culture, while the fieldwork of biographical research is a kind of field work with the purpose of collecting and recording all experience and the information informed by the objects and narrators.

(3) Different strategies. The ethnography mainly emphasizes on synchronicity of narrative and research, stresses on the current circumstances, while the biographical study emphasizes the diachronic experiences and longitudinal narratives, which therefore is not purely objective record of the life story of characters like a camera, but also includes the researchers' subjective judgment and evaluation (Zhang, 2002).

(4) Different purposes. The purpose of ethnography is to gain an overview and universal understanding of the social phenomenon in groups according to comprehensive description, and to provide knowledge and information for other researchers (Zhang, 2002); while biographical research focus on an individual in a group with detailed investigation and description of his relations with the groups and society based on a comprehensive cognitive of social groups, as well as the observation of personal creation and experience on social civilization and culture with the historical orders.

(5) Different description ways. The previous researching work particularly emphasizes on the academic, theoretical and scientific narrative techniques and forms, which results in a rigid academic discourse and stiff narrative tone, both of which are lack of revealing mind

of subjects as a flesh and blood, and lack of fervent concern to discourse objects in life, as strongly abandon the humanity of subjects but only seriously pursuit of truth without emotions. It is the narrative way which can not be tolerated in the experimental era nowadays, but which is used by ethnography to descript objects statically, rationally and mechanically (Zhang, 2002).

As biographical research pays more attention to the psychology course and the soul of individuals, therefore, it focuses on the psychological and emotional state of individuals, and records the life experience filled with life throbbing and passion for life.

Generally speaking, the biographical researching method could be used as one of the main researching method in the common and ordinary social scientific research. For this method, it has the main advantages as: firstly, the historical information or materials that can not be experienced by researchers personally are able to be collected and researched (Song, Zhang & Wang, 2014). Secondly, the unnatural reaction of interviewees during the direct study or researches could be ruled out. Thirdly, the general and certain characteristics of individual psychological and behavioral development can be found and analyzed. But it has also some disadvantage as: firstly, the subjectivity omissions, errors, bias, and other factors in the biographical information can not always avoided (Song, Zhang & Wang, 2014), which will directly affect the results of the study. Secondly, the lack of standardized form results in the difficulty with quantitatively measuring and analyzing. Thirdly, the missing of verbal activity and behavioral responses of the researching objects (Mu & Ding, 2007). Therefore, during our daily use of this method, it is necessary to carry forward the advantage and avoid these disadvantages, so as to use it more efficiently.

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