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## Life History or How Ethics Can Turn into a Research Methodology: A Review of Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles' Lives in Context

### Abstract

Life history research described in the book, *Lives in Context* by Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, constitutes an exercise of scholarship and at the same time of sensitivity towards "the other." The book represents a thorough account of a methodology that integrates the "ethical" as its leading dimension. The book consists of two parts. In the first part of the book the authors develop their approach to life history research. The second part includes articles of other researchers, who have put into practice similar perspectives.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Life History, Artistry

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***Life History* or How Ethics Can Turn into a Research Methodology:  
A Review of Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles' *Lives in Context***

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*Life history research described in the book, *Lives in Context* by Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, constitutes an exercise of scholarship and at the same time of sensitivity towards “the other.” The book represents a thorough account of a methodology that integrates the “ethical” as its leading dimension. The book consists of two parts. In the first part of the book the authors develop their approach to life history research. The second part includes articles of other researchers, who have put into practice similar perspectives. Key words: Qualitative Research, Life History, and Artistry*

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Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles in *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research* present an alternative way of viewing “life history” research. The book can be of interest to all those interested in the specific methodology and those who are interested in “challenging the status quo of knowledge,” to use the words of the authors. It is useful both to beginners, given the detailed and clear presentation of methodology and procedures, and to experienced researchers, as it constitutes a rigorous approach with great consistency concerning its methodology and epistemological references.

In *Lives in Context* the intention of the authors is not to advocate in favor of a particular type of life history research, but to explore what “a life history orientation” might represent in social sciences. Life history is viewed as a multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary research. The title of the book expresses --according to the authors-- the universal underpinnings of any life history, which are that lives are always to be studied and understood in the various contexts where they happen: “The life history researcher’s role is to shift out the meanings of these contextual influences as they play out in the experiences of those whose lives are being exploited.”

What pops out most clearly while reading the book is the ethical concern of the authors, a plea of exercising research that is beneficial for those participating, researchers included, as well as for the audience. Research should be “for people” not just about people. But this does not take the form of the political concern of how to use the outcomes of the research, but of a disciplinary concern, as the “ethical” becomes integrated in the research process, turns into a constituent of the research methodology, rooted in its turn in a particular epistemology. To express it more bluntly, the ethical concern is the condition for life history research to become as good as it can be.

Such approach is of course not completely new. It can be observed in the constellation of methodologies and new genres that have arisen out of the crisis in qualitative research, the questioning of previous approaches, the turning of ethical-political concerns into constituent parts of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). What, however, distinguishes this book and makes its value, is its rigor and consistency in

developing its particular approach, building in that way a strong and convincing case for the methodological “usefulness” of the moral approach. This renders the book interesting and useful also to non-experts of such methodologies. It is exactly this aspect that I would like to bring into evidence in this book review.

Starting with the epistemological underpinnings, these are of an interpretivist epistemology that challenges any objectivity in the study of human lives (Seale, 2005). No dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity is being accepted; the only “reality” recognized is that of an intersubjective realm of existence and meaning generation.

In consistency with the above, knowledge is dependent from the knowing individual and cannot be but relational. Introducing this into the research context it is translated into the researcher turning into the central instrument and “the prime viewing lens” operating inside the research frame, while knowledge is produced in the intersection between the researcher and the researched. Given that “life history” is the par excellence type of research that needs to go deep in investigating human experience, the authors developed a methodology that will set the conditions for making the most out of the instrument that the researcher is and of the knowledge generating researcher-researched relation.

It is in the frame of this effort that the moral aspect is introduced. Ethical concerns imbue the behavior of the researcher and the researcher-researched relation so that they not only turn the relation into an enhancing encounter and a relation rewarding for all, but they also establish the conditions for a richer, more sincere contact that will in its turn allow life-historians to go as deep as it is humanly possible in the understanding of another human being.

The ethical dimension in the research is expressed by a number of concepts, used throughout the research procedure, which take the form of research tools or techniques that will lead to the desired end result. Such are reflexivity, relationality, authenticity, and artistry among others.

I will start with relationality, as the central concept and central instrument in reference to which the other concepts are to be more fully understood. Relationality means the depth of connection, interpersonal resonance, and trust among others. It constitutes the condition and the most appropriate meaning to achieve the depth of knowledge required in life history research: the development of relationship and trust are the keys to self disclosure in a natural way and the means with which barriers could more easily be overcome.

As it becomes obvious, relationality does not refer just to the building of a relation, something that, under the name of “rapport,” is evident in the field of life history research and of qualitative research in general (Patton, 1990), but to a sincere, authentic, and caring one as sine qua non conditions for the relation to become “functional” and lead to the realization of the research purposes.

Authenticity has to be exercised at different levels, that of the overall relation of the researcher to the research, of the relation of the researcher to participants and the researchers self-understanding. Authenticity means for the researcher to be himself, to be present in the research design and all through the research process, which should reflect his intellectual, creative and moral passions and commitments. It means to be committed to the epistemological underpinnings and possibilities of life history methodology, the people and life contexts to be explored, and the professional communities and contexts

within which one is situated. For the relations with the participants it means that trust, mutual respect, and common purpose are to develop.

Reflexivity means researchers placing themselves in the position of the researched and acquiring experiential understanding of what it means to be researched. This enhances the sensitivity of the researchers, their capacity of becoming responsive to the needs of the researched, of realizing how far they can go on sensitive issues, when they have to stop, what to do when it becomes painful for the participant to respond. Further, researchers are not detached from the research process but are a part of it. Researchers enter the research with their own experiences and in this sense, research becomes an autobiographical act and an extension of what the researcher is as a person. In their turn, researchers are affected by the research both in their professional quality and as individual.

Relationality, authenticity, and reflexivity together with other related principles, such as mutuality, sincerity, empathy etc., are not clear-cut and distinct principles but overlapping ones, sharing the same focus and in concert moving the research towards fulfilling its purpose. They have the double facet of moral principles and methodological devices, the very dimension of “morality” being “operationalised” --if I am allowed to use the term in this frame-- in order to push the research forward. This is not a *laissez faire* approach but a very rigorous one, involving very clear steps to each of which are attached systematically to elaborated procedures. To illustrate how these principles are being instrumentalized in the research process and to bring into evidence the rigorousness of inquiry, I will describe in the following the research procedure.

The method or technique used is that of an inquiry that takes the form of “guided conversation.” This is a shared enterprise involving in the first place mutual commitment of researchers and the researched to work over a period for the purpose of gaining in-depth insights into an area of mutual interest. Starting with design and all through the inquiry procedure, the researcher is asked to remain in focus and is provided with detailed instructions of how to proceed: The researcher should first develop the areas to explore and subsequently formulate questions to pose that have to be broad enough and open-ended to allow for exploration. Both the topics to explore and the questions to be asked may be discussed with the participants before hand and take form from the final decisions with their participations. This, according to the authors, has the advantage of rendering the procedure even more informal. However, the authors do not exclude a stricter design through more detailed guidelines.

Participants are chosen in the first place with criteria based upon their interest and willingness to share their experiences. The number of participants is irrelevant; one person could do as well as many, as there are no claims of generalizability. Alternatively the target of a sampling procedure is to include those persons who will provide the opportunity for the inquiry to go as far in depth as possible, while the purpose of the research is attained, when, through repeated meeting sessions, saturation of the information is achieved at the level of the individual.

Initiating contact with participants is no different to how one gets to know and relate to friends. The “guided conversation” itself takes the form of a conversation with friends. The multiple meetings foreseen in the frame of life history provide ample opportunities for building a relation. Under the same rationale and in order to facilitate unreserved exchange as venues are chosen friendly places, where the participants can feel

comfortable. More specifically concerning the “questioning” procedure, this has as follows: After posing the more general questions the job of the researcher is to listen carefully, prompt for further details and clarifications, and eventually pose more specific questions.

As it is easily established, the procedure remains more or less similar to the one commonly used in qualitative inquires, but the emphasis here is different, as guided conversation is “as much about creating an atmosphere of security, intentional meaning making, reflexivity, and genuine interaction around topics that are at once intensely personal yet vibrantly interesting to both sides.” It goes without saying that all efforts are made to abolish any hierarchy in the researcher-respondent relation.

Detailed instructions are given on the various other aspects of the procedure, as well as tips concerning how to get the most of the encounter. Suggestions such as moving venues for evoking different types of memories are mentioned as strategies for creating rich meaning making and reaching deeper levels of self-awareness. An interesting concept put forward is “researchable moments” that authors define as opportunities emerging for connecting with the others and “to see into the inner reaches of the meaning of a life.” The authors state that far beyond the limited nature of the conversational process for gaining information, the intensity of two lives intersecting (in the case of their version of life history inquiry) presents unique opportunities for surprise. The moment has to be “seized” and the result will be unique insights into the life of others.

Analysis, interpretation and reporting constitute integral parts of the research activity and are to be inspired by and conform to the same principles. They should be reflexive, genuinely representing the reality of respondents, respecting the wholeness of human experience, represent the relatedness between researcher and researched, be communicative and evocative for the audiences they address.

Life history leads to very rich outcomes concerning lived experiences, to new insights into peoples’ lives. Analysis, interpretation, and reporting in life history research should not be a reductionist activity, as it is the case with analysis and reporting in traditional forms of qualitative research: Strictly adhering to a categorization system of analytic scheme equals to slicing the data, slicing the lives of people, loose the whole and take the parts for the whole. “What we need is not slicing and ordering but being immersed in a specific life, trying to grasp the wholeness, the interrelatedness of human experience within complex social systems.” Interpretation constitutes a prolongation of the intersubjective character of research and is the result of meaning making in common and of merging perspectives: “we have so much time together we have learned so much about her we eventually might start to think, just a little, like her.”

Reflexivity and empathy are also involved in interpretation: “we allow our subjectivities to surface but we consciously take note of them, actually articulating them clearly and unapologetically in the final account.” Through empathy the researcher tries to “feel the depth of emotions,” pay attention to complexities and “as much as humanly possible...embody their experiences.” But in interpreting, researchers are not expected to be totally immersed or strictly abide to the understandings and interpretations of the respondents: they should “try to set back,” but...just a little.”

If the above conditions are met participants would know of “our authenticity and integrity as researchers,” “they will know of the moral fiber of our commitment to their experiences and of our mutual purpose.” As a consequence “they will feel comfortable in

placing the analysis and representations of their lives in our care.” The authors conclude that such conditions of exhibitions of trust enhance the quality of information revealed and enrich the analysis and representation process.

The choice of form of reporting follows the same line of thought. Conventional forms of reporting cannot do sufficiently well to account of the wholeness of human experience and the debt of emotions, feelings, etc. It is there that artistry comes into play: through forms of art, meaning can be better grasped, more efficiently communicated and a greater immediacy can be achieved. In the artistic type of representation should, however, be applied the same rigor as in other types of reporting. It remains, however, and this applies in all cases, that life histories can never be completely accounted of either through an art informed or another type of reporting.

An artistic format can constitute the type of reporting decided upon by the researcher right from the beginning, or can be the outcome of the inspiration of the moment when the researcher feels that there is something deep to communicate that can be expressed only through forms that transcend the conventional forms of representation. Thus artistry is used, either as the principal reporting form or as a complementary one that will account of all that is “not reported,” or will account of deeper insights or will give more space to the reflexivity and subjectivity of the researcher. Along these lines, although the aesthetic should run through the whole research procedure and give to it its special flair, it is mainly in the representation of research outcomes that artistry is to be involved. Finally, artistry is serving the life history methodology purposes by rendering research and research results more accessible to broader audiences, so people outside the academic community can be engaged and benefit from research.

*Lives in Context* begins with an excerpt from a long “life history” study conducted by one of its authors, Gary Knowles, about a professor, under the pseudonym “Thomas.” It serves as a form of introduction to the “complexities” of life history research and as an overview of the issues that relate to life history research. The book ends with a number of chapters in which different life history researchers share aspects of their research. These concrete insights and perspectives, particularly as they are linked with the practice of research, constitute a useful guide to those who potentially would like to be involved in similar type of research and also provide an added value to the book.

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