

Review:

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**Ardra L. Cole & J. Gary Knowles (Eds.) (2001). *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*. Walnut Creek, CA.: AltaMira Press, 262 pages, ISBN 0-7591-0144-2**

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**Abstract:** COLE and KNOWLES present a book that is simultaneously an introduction to the field, an edited collection of mainly Canadian examples of research issues emerging from the field and a manifesto for arts-informed research. The book is divided into two sections: the first part is written by COLE and KNOWLES and is 100+ pages presenting a useful overview of the life history field and providing guidelines for "doing" life history research; the second part consists of 13 edited chapters which demonstrate both the range of uses of life history research and the spectrum of methods employed. The particular focus of this book that distinguishes it from other life-history method books is its focus on the use of arts-informed research. This is the major strength of the book and, while the review raises some criticisms, it is worth reading it for this discussion. Its weaknesses relate to its multiple purpose, its lack of visual exemplars and its limited engagement with issues such as the social value of life-history work.

#### **Table of Contents**

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Structure and Content](#)
- [3. Overview: Research as Art?](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

## **1. Introduction**

I first came across the work of J. Gary KNOWLES in a chapter in Ivor GOODSON's early seminal text that explored the value of biographical and life history research in understanding the lives of teachers (KNOWLES, 1992). In that chapter KNOWLES presents theoretical models derived from case studies for understanding the lives of pre-service teachers. It is interesting to read his work a decade later and note the ways in which his work (and the broader field) have developed over this period. I shall return to this matter later in the review. First, it is necessary to provide the reader with some detail on the authors and their text. [1]

*The Editors/Authors:* COLE and KNOWLES are both educational researchers based at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). They are co-directors of the Centre for Arts-Informed Research and a number of the other contributors to the book are connected to them or the centre. Of the remaining 13 contributors, 10 are from Toronto and all are Canadian except two contributors from the USA. Surprisingly, given the editors' OISE base, there are more

contributors with a background in therapeutic practices or nursing than there are educationists. Nevertheless, the book is clearly a product of a particular network of researchers working in the same place and focusing on the same issues. This is not to suggest a limitation, since this lends coherence to the book and avoids the difficulties of drawing together the work of very disparate writers. The blurb on the cover of the book describes the contributors as "novice researchers". While this is true for many, it does something of a disservice to a number of established researchers amongst the contributors. [2]

## 2. Structure and Content

One of the difficulties with reviewing this book is that it is not quite clear what it is (or perhaps it is that I am not clear how I should classify it). In form, the book is an edited volume, in that there are contributions from fifteen different authors including the editors. This does not, however, reveal the full extent of the editors' roles in the book. Indeed, it is better understood as a book authored by COLE and KNOWLES, with additional contributions by the remaining authors. In content the book presents itself in part as a manual on how to do life history research (the blurb on the cover sells it as such), part as an edited collection of a range of researchers' experiences of life history research, and most significantly as something of a manifesto by the two authors/editors on what good life history research should be. These different foci produce an interesting tension that gives rise to both the strengths and weaknesses of the text. [3]

The book is bracketed by two excerpts from a study by KNOWLES on the life of an environmental sciences professor, which serve to highlight some of the issues facing life history research and researchers. Central concerns are raised around the notion of truth and lies in the retelling of stories and the creative and serendipitous nature of much of the process. These issues are then unpacked in much more detail in the jointly authored six chapters comprising Section One of the book. [4]

Section One is labelled "Exploring Method" and is 100+ pages presenting a useful overview of the life history field and providing guidelines for "doing" life history research. The first two chapters define life history research and set it apart from some of the other related approaches, including autobiography, autoethnography, biography, case history, interpretive biography, life story, narrative, personal history, and story. For COLE and KNOWLES life history research is distinguished by its focus on context. They argue that:

"Lives are never lived in vacuums. Lives are never lived in complete isolation from social contexts. [...] To be human is to experience 'the relational', no matter how it is defined, and at the same time, to be shaped by 'the institutional', the structural expressions of community and society. To be human is to be molded by context." (p.22) [5]

Behind their assertion that life history emphasises context lies a counter foil to the critique of the broad spectrum of biographical research that argues that an

emphasis on individuals and lives necessarily foregrounds individuals and agency and backgrounds structures and the associated constraints on agency. Life history researchers, like the editors, have attempted to move beyond this dualism and argue that it is possible to hold the two in tension by maintaining a focus on context. [6]

Two issues struck me. COLE and KNOWLES seek to distinguish between life history research and other approaches (such as biographical research methods and narrative inquiry) and claim that the former approach takes context seriously while the latter do not. I am not convinced that at least some of these related biographical approaches mentioned also attempt to focus on context and, therefore, there is no real evidence presented by the authors for their claim. Secondly, while the claim is made that "context is everything", I do not believe that the author/editors and the contributors necessarily live by this mantra throughout the text. I think it is almost impossible to make context everything within a methodology that foregrounds an individual experience so fundamentally; the best that can be achieved is context as a background. If context is indeed foregrounded, then the individual necessarily recedes. I do believe that the authors are correct in their focus on relationships, but what is needed is a methodology that does not start with the individual and moves outwards through relationships, but begins with relationship. It is not possible to discuss the implications of this in detail here, but a relational analysis must surely make relationships the unit of analysis; there are theorists such as BOURDIEU (see for example BOURDIEU and WACQUANT, 1992) or ELIAS (1970) who have offered useful insights into thinking about lives in this manner for a very long time. [7]

Chapter Two suggests a set of principles that should guide life history research and in so doing raises the issues of ethics. Four broad areas are covered, namely relationality, mutuality, empathy and care/sensitivity/respect. COLE and KNOWLES argue that we should apply the same principles by which we lead our daily lives to the research enterprise. While that is a good starting point, research work is not equal to life and there are numerous artificial situations where commonsense is not all that helpful. Nevertheless, recognising the relationship between the researcher and the researched, development of a mutual basis for interaction and interacting in a way that does no harm are obviously foundational ethical principles. The chapter does, however, raise for me the more murky areas of life history research where the lives being researched are not university professors, teachers, nurses or other relatively powerful, articulate individuals who are able to understand the research process and enter into a mutual relationship with the researcher. In contexts such as my own where life history work is employed in communities with no power, mutuality is sometimes less simple to assure and, in these cases, perhaps empathy and care/sensitivity/respect are as much as is possible. Further, researching the lives of racists, gang members, corporate executives or any number of other categories of individuals raises moral and ethical dilemmas for researchers that are not adequately discussed. Is empathy always appropriate in these cases? Surely life history research cannot only be used if the relationship is mutual, or are we then not condemned to forever research people like ourselves? [8]

Despite these concerns, the chapter does provide a very useful basis for discussion and is richly interwoven with examples of issues emerging from COLE and KNOWLES' own research. One of the most interesting examples is a section in which COLE presents a very personal account of being the "subject" of a life history interview. She describes how little her theoretical knowledge and practical experience as a researcher prepared her for the actual experience of the research: the anxieties about being misrepresented and portraying the complexities of the life lived, the emotions and pain of revisiting her past, and the occasional sense of violation. COLE's reflections are juxtaposed with guidelines she had written in an earlier text and this demonstrates wonderfully the distance between even the best theory and the practice of the research process. [9]

In addition to the discussion in Chapter Two, there are five contributors in Section Two that raise a range of ethical issues and provide useful exemplars. KNOWLES has a chapter in which he examines the responsibilities a researcher has to the community she/he is researching, where she/he is part of that community (in this instance home-educating families). He describes the ways in which his particular role slipped from observer/listener to expert for the community, or research expert for an external audience. A second example is Chapter 10, in which Kathleen GATES, Kathryn CHURCH and Cathy CROW explore the ethical implications of fidelity to both the process and findings of life history research. GATES is the researcher, while CHURCH and CROW were both participants in a study that focused on social activists. GATES is, in fact, the writer of the piece, although all three are credited. She examines how principles of mutuality, respect and beneficence in the relationships between the three played themselves out in the research process. Once again, however, both participants have life stories that are not dissimilar to GATES's life story and, thus, the relationship is more easily one of equals; this remains my overall concern with this aspect of the text. [10]

Returning to Section One (authored solely by COLE and KNOWLES), Chapters Three to Six move more definitively into the "how to" manual part of the book, taking the reader through the stages of a life history project. Usefully, the first step is a section on understanding yourself as researcher. While the turn to reflexivity in much social science research can become a navel-gazing exercise, it is very important that life history researchers reflect on their own lives before asking others to do so. Once this is done, COLE and KNOWLES take the reader through a comprehensive discussion of the entire process—from developing the project through preparing to make sense of the life and, finally, to analysing and presenting the life. Throughout these chapters the authors make extensive use of excerpts from their own work, including a number of extended extracts from COLE's work on teacher educators. These extracts include thick descriptions of interview settings, interactions before and after interviews, and the researcher's self-reflections during the research process. While there is a definite sense that the intended audience for these chapters is a novice researcher, the chapters include really useful suggestions from the authors' experiences which more seasoned life history researchers will find very helpful. One example that I found particularly interesting is their foregrounding of the spatio-temporal aspects of

doing the research. For example, varying the venue and time of interviews opens up new possibilities: for example, asking to go to the interviewee's home or workplace in order to have access to other pertinent information such as photographs, documents or memorabilia. The extracts are useful in grounding the concepts under discussion in real research data, but I found that they could have been focused more clearly at times. Further, although a range of methods are written about, including visual media (which is discussed further below), there are no exemplars in the text. Nonetheless, these are minor quibbles with an otherwise useful set of chapters for novice researchers. [11]

Section Two of the book is called "Experiencing Method" and consists of the edited collection component of the book. Firstly, the 13 chapters serve to demonstrate the range of uses of life history research. Included here are Renee Sarchuk WILL's account of how nurses' life histories substantially inform their professional knowledge (Chapter 7) and Jeff ORR's account of indigenous or aboriginal knowledge systems amongst First Nations educators. Secondly, a number of chapters highlight or focus on the range of methods that can be used in this type of research. Along side the standard interviews, diaries and letters, a number of chapters discuss the use of visual art—not surprising, given the subtitle of the book. For example, in Chapter 12 Avi ROSE describes how he used art as a technique for reflecting on his own positionality in relation to the research and as an instrument in collecting data from the participants. The latter tool (asking participants to contribute a piece of art) is not unfamiliar to those who research young children, but is less commonly used with adults. ROSE describes the ways in which this provided alternative forms of communication and became a vehicle for new insights and elaboration on thoughts and feelings expressed elsewhere. In Chapter 13, James A MUCHMORE describes how a chance visit to a gallery turned into a serendipitous moment of self-realisation for the researcher that clarified his identity as a life history researcher. While the trigger for this moment was visual art, I think the real issue is serendipity and the ways in which unrelated life experiences shape our understanding of the world. I found myself recalling a similar "ah-ha" moment whilst reading a novel during my doctoral studies. MUCHMORE goes on to describe how the artwork (called a reliquary) was, in itself, an exploration of a life and how his experience of interacting with it shaped his own understanding on how to do life history research. Again, I recalled analogous moments in my thinking about presenting a life history in my work where I have drawn upon literary techniques. Thus, while I have not worked in a visual medium, I recognized the experience in a different art form, namely narrative and story telling. [12]

There are further chapters (17 and 18) that explore photography and art criticism as tools in the life history process. Yet, surprisingly, in none of these chapters is there a single visual depiction of what is being discussed. This was a major disappointment for me. The entire text, despite its focus on "art", does not contain a single plate with photographs, paintings or drawings, nor is there a poem or the lyrics of a song, and there is only one single table. I think the book would have been vastly strengthened as a handbook had the reader been able to experience the power of the visual arts rather than simply reading about them. On the posi-

tive side, a useful feature of the second section is a short editorial paragraph at the beginning of each chapter that highlights the key issues and refers the reader to the chapters in Section One that deal with the issues being highlighted. [13]

### **3. Overview: Research as Art?**

The sub-title of the volume more than hints at a major theme underpinning the approach that is spelled out in the book. COLE and KNOWLES are part of a growing number of researchers who feel that education and social studies more generally should draw more from the arts and humanities than the sciences for methodological models. The argument goes that when the social sciences began to be established within the academy, they emerged at a time when the positive sciences were unchallengeable, and thus they were constructed in the image of the sciences (hence the term social science) rather than the arts. This is viewed as a mistake which left social studies methodologically limited. Had they looked instead to the arts there would have been a different set of methods and a different methodological approach. It is this reorientation that is increasingly occurring today and is being championed in this book. Thus, photo essays, art, poetry and techniques such as empathy are viewed as more desirable than the traditional social science techniques of interviews, surveys and observation which aim at generalisable findings. The arts also aim at different outcomes from the research process, being less concerned with critique or policy and more concerned with deepening our understanding of what it means to be human. [14]

While the long tradition of life history research has sat on the periphery of social science, it has tended to look toward the social sciences for a basis of legitimization. COLE and KNOWLES present a case for turning the other way and legitimizing life history research within an arts framework. Having read KNOWLES's 1992 chapter in GOODSON's book, this shift was somewhat unexpected. That chapter epitomises the social science tradition for me, with its systematic generation of theory through the development of schemata and generalisable models. Of course it is entirely acceptable that KNOWLES has moved on from where he was more than a decade ago. Whether it is a welcome move is unclear to me. I am attracted by the ways in which arts-based research challenges the underlying assumptions about the nature of research, but I also feel some disquiet from the perspective that my context provides, where pressures on educational researchers to produce research that is of immediate social benefit are enormous. Influencing policy makers requires hard data (we are constantly being reminded), and it is unlikely that photo-essays or single life histories are defined as hard data. While the researcher and the researched who participate in this process appear to benefit greatly, it is not always clear how this new knowledge and personal growth is transferred into a wider social realm. Developing better understandings of self and other, and demonstrating the unique and varied lives of individuals is extremely valuable as a counter foil to statistical macro pictures, but it does not easily or confidently lead to social interventions on a wide scale. This takes us into debates about the nature and purpose of research and the boundaries between research and other social expressions. This is, of course, not a new issue but one that has been grappled

within the paradigm debates around qualitative and quantitative research. As has been argued in the virtual pages of this journal, however, there is a growing rapprochement between these approaches that argue for mixed-methods and "fitness for purpose". In reading this book I had little sense that these debates were being engaged with and felt that the book had taken too polemical a stance. [15]

Who then should read this book? Undoubtedly it is a worthwhile read—thought-provoking and well presented. The publishers no doubt would like to market it as a research methods book and market it to students. I think that this is the group to which I would be least inclined to recommend this book, unless it is one text among a number. The book is not really practical enough to assist in setting up a project. As an edited collection on life history research, it also disappoints a little because it is so uniform in its approach. In addition, there is no real debate between contributors or the fundamentally different approaches that are being proposed. Thus, a specialist may find it somewhat restricting. It is in the "manifesto" on life history as an arts-based research approach that the real interest lies and it is here that it makes an important contribution to a wider discussion. People interested in this dialogue would gain the most from the volume and I would recommend that they include it in their reading lists. [16]

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