

Review:

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Ken Plummer (2001). Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism. London: Sage, 306 pages, Cloth (ISBN 0-7619-6131-3) £55.00, Paper (ISBN 0-7619-6132-1) £17.99

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Abstract: PLUMMER's book is a substantially revised edition of his now classic 1983 *Documents of Life*. It is an outstanding introduction to the field of qualitative biographical research, particularly in sociology. The text can be broadly divided into two parts. Firstly, a conceptual overview outlining different types of biographic research, different types of documents, as well as reviews of major developments in the field. The second part focuses on the research process, collecting and managing data, and writing. A major strength is PLUMMER's engagement with new developments in the field, particularly the "narrative turn" in the social sciences and insights from feminism and postmodernism. While the book is an excellent introduction, experienced researchers will also gain from the inclusive overview that PLUMMER provides. Underpinning the entire book is PLUMMER's belief that a revised "critical humanism" is the most appropriate basis from which to study lives. While this is a seductive notion, it is suggested by the reviewer that "critical humanism" is nonetheless problematic as it cannot avoid overemphasizing the individual. This does not detract from an outstanding book and an exemplary revision.

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1. Introduction and Context

Some twenty years ago Ken PLUMMER published *Documents of Life: An introduction to the problems and the literature of a humanistic method* (hereafter *Documents-1*). When *Documents-1* was published it quickly became the key reference text for a revitalizing tradition of biographic work in a number of disciplines. Later reviewers referred to it as a defining and inspirational text, and it remained a key starting point for anyone entering the literature on biographical and life history methodology. Therefore, when a "revised" edition of a germinal text appears, it is worth taking note (hereafter *Documents-2*). [1]

Documents-1 was published at a time when biographical research such as oral histories and life histories represented a long, but largely marginal, even underground, tradition within the social sciences. Twenty years later there are numerous journals dedicated to qualitative and biographical research, students are taught this methodology as part of mainstream research methods courses, and there are large numbers of introductory and advanced texts available. *Documents-2* is published into a context where biographical research and qualitative research do not have to justify their existence, and the debates have shifted towards a rapprochement between qualitative and quantitative approaches. *Documents-1* contributed in no small way to the establishment of these approaches as a legitimate part of mainstream social science research. This new edition is a substantial reworking of the earlier text, which attempts not only to reissue a classic text, but to engage with the major developments that have happened since *Documents-1* was published. Only three of the original chapters are recognizably the same and even these have been substantially updated. There are entirely new chapters on history, writing, narratives, memory and humanism, and some of the earlier chapters have been cut. What makes the new edition so exciting is the way in which the author has engaged with new developments in the field and modified his thinking, while thoughtfully defending the belief that humanism, albeit a modified form of humanism, centrally underpins the methodology. [2]

2. Overview of the Book

The opening chapter seeks to locate the work on lives within the broader discourses of the social sciences. PLUMMER sees the study of lives within the disciplines of the social sciences as a necessary corrective to the overly scientific and structural analyses that have dominated the social sciences. At the outset, PLUMMER outlines the basis of what he calls a *critical humanism*, which he argues has five central criteria: Firstly, it must "pay tribute to human subjectivity and creativity"; secondly, it must deal with human experience through their social and economic organization; thirdly, it must show a naturalistic "intimate familiarity" with such experiences; fourthly, there must be self-awareness by the sociologist; and finally, it espouses a radical, pragmatic empiricism (PLUMMER, 2001, p.14). I will return to this matter of critical humanism in my evaluation below. [3]

The remainder of the book can be broadly separated into three parts. The first part (Chapters 2 to 5) provides a review of the field of biographical work. The second part (Chapters 6 to 11) engages directly with the practice of biographical work. Finally, Chapter 12 concludes the book by returning to the matter of humanism. I will briefly outline the key arguments in each of these sections. [4]

2.1 The biographical field

In the second chapter PLUMMER outlines the diversity of life stories by reviewing the field of sociology and anthropology. The review in this chapter is restricted to illustrating distinctions between long and short life stories, "naturalistic",

"researched" and "reflexive" stories, oral histories, psychobiographies, collective (autobiographies), family stories, biographies, autoethnographies, and a host of other categories. Each category is clearly explained and the reader is referred to key texts that illustrate the genre. PLUMMER makes the useful distinction between life stories as a *resource* that help social scientists understand history, processes, change, and totalities (and here PLUMMER highlights some of the difficulties that are linked to this use), and life stories as a *topic* in their own right. It is the latter focus that has been the most significant shift in the way life stories have been used since the publication of *Documents-1*, because it is the reflexive, recursive and discursive dimensions to biographical work that have been highlighted in the last two decades. [5]

Where Chapter 2 distinguishes between different types of life stories based on interviews, Chapter 3 explores the different forms of "life documents" (other than interviews) on which life stories can be based. Again, the chapter provides a useful review of the literature by taking the reader through a selection of forms, from diaries through to visual media such as photographs and on to video. Chapter 4 traces the genealogy of life stories from oral societies through to the information society. While life story telling has been around for millennia, the proliferation in volume and form is such that telling life stories is becoming a defining feature of contemporary society with PLUMMER suggesting that we can now begin speaking of an "auto/biographical society" (p.78). The final of the "review chapters" focuses on the discipline of sociology (where PLUMMER locates himself) and traces the development of a sociological method in Chicago, where life histories gained institutional and intellectual legitimation, not least through their association with symbolic interactionism. [6]

2.2 The practicalities of biographical research

The title of Chapter 6, "Getting and Doing Life Stories", signals a shift of focus on to the practical problems of doing this type of research. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 each deal with a different stage of the research process: getting the data; managing the data; writing up the research. PLUMMER is refreshingly open about the difficulties of this type of research and avoids simple formulae or guidelines for interviewing, analyzing or writing about lives. For example, PLUMMER challenges the reader to attempt to answer some of the questions that have been suggested as useful for interviews (Describe your life as the chapters in a book!) and concludes, echoing C. Wright MILLS (1959), that one learns how to do this type of research through a lifetime of mistakes (PLUMMER 2001, p.146). [7]

Chapter 9 is dedicated to the question of narrative in life stories, and therefore returns to the issue of the story as a topic in its own right. This is one of the entirely new chapters in the book and PLUMMER provides an accessible introduction to the notoriously complex world of narrative, including discussions of both the structural and post-structural literature. The "narrative turn" links into a broader debate on where the social sciences draw their influences. When the disciplines in the social sciences such as sociology, psychology and anthropology started, they tended to model themselves on the natural sciences rather than the

humanities. The narrative turn in the social sciences has been part of a broader corrective realignment where social scientists have begun to draw on the concepts and tools of humanities disciplines, particularly literary studies. Included in this turn is a shift away from the presentation of lives in cold academic discourse towards creative forms of presentation that include poetry, dialogue and short stories. PLUMMER welcomes these developments, but cautions against losing sight of the documents and the lives these documents are based on, as researchers immerse themselves in the theoretical trends in literary theory. [8]

Chapter 10 focuses on issues of power and ethics within this genre of research. *Documents-1* was published a decade after Alvin GOULDNER's call for a "sociology of sociology" (1971). At the time reflexivity was only beginning to be viewed as a central ethical and methodological issue. Since the 1970s and early 1980s this has altered significantly, not least because of the pioneering work of feminist writers (see STANLEY & WISE, 1983). In *Documents-2* PLUMMER thoughtfully engages with the recent developments and makes tentative suggestions as to how researchers can deal with these issues. He explores issues related to the researcher's role (friend, stranger, acquaintance, lover) and his or her emotions and then covers specific ethical issues including confidentiality, honesty, deception, exploitation, consent, and harm. As with the previous chapters, PLUMMER deals with these issues by drawing on examples from the literature and presents the complexity rather than glibly specifying procedures. Ultimately, he argues that researchers should proceed within the framework of "five great ethical principles of current times:

- The principle of respect, recognition and tolerance for persons and their differences.
- The principle of promoting the caring of others, what has been called, following many feminists, 'an ethic of care'.
- The principles of expanding equalities, fairness and justice.
- The principle of enlarging spheres of autonomy, freedom and choice.
- The principle of minimizing harm." (PLUMMER 2001, p.228) [9]

Once again, it is the individual researcher who will have to interpret these principles in the light of the specifics of their context, and PLUMMER provides a useful set of issues that need to be thought through in relation to each situation. [10]

The final chapter is an epilogue that returns to the matter of the humanist underpinnings of much life story work in which PLUMMER addresses the critiques of humanism that have become prevalent since the publication of *Documents-1*. I will discuss this in a bit more detail below. [11]

3. Evaluation

Documents of Life 2 is an exemplar of what a revised edition should be. Given the status of "classic text" that *Documents-1* achieved over the past two decades, PLUMMER could have simply reissued it with a few new references and a new introduction and there would no doubt have been a market for the new edition. But PLUMMER has eschewed the easy route, and instead has produced a text that will in all likelihood become a classic in its own right. To be sure, it has built on the strengths of the first version, but PLUMMER is refreshingly open to new developments and non-defensive about the limitations of his earlier work. Specifically, PLUMMER has engaged extensively with the creative work of many feminist researchers as well as the literature that falls loosely under the rubric of postmodernism. [12]

One of the strengths of *Documents-1* was its ability to appeal to a very diverse audience. *Documents-2* continues in this vein. In part this is achieved through PLUMMER's ability to write accessibly without oversimplifying, and simultaneously identify trends and commonalities that cut through much of the posturing and boundary maintenance that occurs across and within disciplines. The book also includes guides to further reading at the end of every chapter around the key themes discussed in that chapter, which makes it an ideal starting point for anyone entering the field. With as much as half the book being dedicated to overviews of trends, and the additional references at the end of each chapter, a novice to the field cannot find a better entry point into the literature (provided of course that they follow PLUMMER's signposts to the literature itself). There is also a useful appendix on new technologies and electronic sources. [13]

Every reviewer is likely to find some references missing, and it would be mean spirited to make a large point of this, but the literature reviewed is restricted to that published in English, and largely in Britain and America. Other recent texts in the field have attempted to build bridges between, for example, the work published in Germany and that published in Britain, but this is absent from PLUMMER's text (see CHAMBERLAYNE, BORNAT & WENGRAF 2000). Similarly, from the perspective of my location at the southern tip of Africa, I thought there were few references to work on and from this continent, particularly where these represent important developments in the field, such as Dick WERBNER's *Tears of the Dead* (1991), which develops social biography, and Charles VAN ONSELEN's *The Seed is Mine* (1997), which amounts to something akin to *The Polish Peasant* in its scale. [14]

There may be some frustration amongst those readers who seek a research manual for doing life history research. This is not PLUMMER's intention, and in my opinion the book is superior for not going down that road. While Chapters 6, 7 and 8 raise issues and problems on getting data, managing data, and writing about the data, they do not tell the reader how to do this type of research. What they do, is provide a rich discussion on the range of options and the consequences of adopting certain approaches. Any reader, whether a student entering the field or an experienced life history researcher, will undoubtedly gain

from PLUMMER's extensive personal experience and his obvious familiarity with both the methodological and substantive biographical literature, but they will ultimately have to make decisions about how they conduct their research themselves. Perhaps because of the complexity of this type of research, there are few attempts at detailing methods either in more general methodology texts or specific biographic ones (see ATKINSON 1998 and MILLER 2000). [15]

4. Humanism

I have mentioned that PLUMMER readily engages with new developments and has modified his own thoughts substantially. However, the one aspect that he does seek to defend from the original text is a commitment to humanism. In *Documents-1* he sought to establish life story work as a "humanist method", and humanism, albeit a more complex and multi-faceted version, remains central to PLUMMER's approach. In this sense he is taking a clear stance and not simply providing a neutral overview of the field. [16]

But what is this thing he calls "critical humanism"? In the epilogue PLUMMER seeks to retrieve the concept of humanism and defend it against many of the critiques that it has been subjected to over the past two decades. Feminists, post-colonial theorists, postmodernists, queer theorists and others have attacked Humanism for a variety of reasons. At the core of the critique is the argument that humanism has attempted to universalize the values and experiences of white, western, heterosexual, middle-class males, and thereby negated the experiences of anyone who does not fit into this category. PLUMMER accepts much of this critique, but argues that we cannot do without the concept. In its stereotypical form humanism becomes untenable in the postmodern, post-colonial, and globalized world. But he argues, although not in these words, that there is something of a "straw person" that has been set up in order to be knocked down. Instead, PLUMMER posits a new and broadly encompassing humanism which sheds its specific western character. To support his call, he points out that many critics of humanism (SAID, CÉSAIRE and ABU-LUGHOD are cited) "lapse into a kind of humanism at different points of their argument" (PLUMMER 2001, p.260) and "some kind of humanist claims" can be found in the work of feminists, post-colonial theorists and social theorists more generally (p.261). [17]

The new critical humanism that PLUMMER begins to outline rejects the notion of a "unitary" self-actualizing individual and posits a notion of an "embedded, dialogic, contingent, embodied, universal self with moral (and political character)" (p.262). I have sympathy for PLUMMER's position and it is difficult to argue with this depiction of a human. But that is also partly the problem. PLUMMER's version of the new humanism is so all encompassing that I suspect it loses its use value. It essentially argues that humans are complex beings: individuals; socially situated, unique; universal. It strikes me as somewhat feel-good, with little analytic power, unless one or two of these concepts are prioritized. At the core of humanism must lie the human individual, rather than the group. PLUMMER does argue that the individual must be the starting point (p.255). If that is the case, then some of the other dimensions must fall into a secondary level, and then as

much as he tries, PLUMMER does not escape the critiques that humanism overemphasizes the role of the individual. My own sense is that lives are more usefully understood relationally (ELIAS, 1991; BOURDIEU, 1992), in terms of the networks that individuals are a part of. This is a way one is able to avoid the dualistic trap that PLUMMER seeks to avoid but cannot quite escape. [18]

5. Conclusion

Documents-2 is an outstanding text that will appeal to a wide range of readers from a number of disciplinary perspectives. PLUMMER has eclipsed his own classic text with an update that will undoubtedly become the new point of departure for people working in the ever-expanding field of biographical work. It delineates the field without policing the boundaries, and introduces a range of perspectives while simultaneously articulating a sophisticated (albeit not unproblematic) position that takes as its point of departure the need for social science to take the human subject more seriously in its analytic endeavours. As an invitation to begin the exploration of a rich vein of work, PLUMMER's book is highly successful. [19]

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