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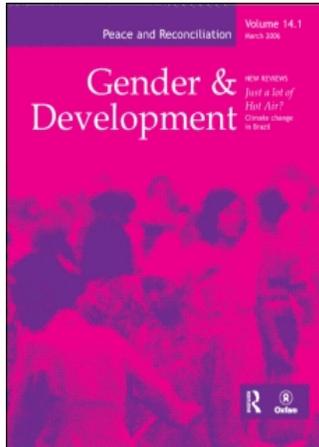
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Reflections on the use of the life history method in researching rural African women: field experiences from Uganda and Zimbabwe

Doris M. Kakuru and Gaynor G. Paradza

This article examines some methodological issues in using the life history approach in social research. Although there are diverse opinions on how the approach should be used, there are certain methods of collecting, analysing, and reporting ensuing data that are often associated with it; these methods were used by the authors in recent studies carried out in Uganda and Zimbabwe. The authors' experiences show that conducting life history research in the area of HIV and AIDS in a rural African context presents some methodological and ethical dilemmas, which cannot always be resolved. The paper also highlights the methodological, moral, and ethical dilemmas faced by African women carrying out research on other African women, and some ways of resolving these.

Introduction

The setting is rural Uganda and Zimbabwe, where communities live in villages of clustered homesteads, and where the authors of this article were studying the impact of HIV and AIDS on rural communities. As part of this study, we interviewed adult women who had experience of HIV and AIDS, either as people living with HIV or AIDS, or as caregivers of people with AIDS and children made vulnerable by HIV or AIDS, in order to capture women's perceptions and experiences of the epidemic and its impact. One of the methods selected and used in this research was the life history approach, which involved collecting 'life stories' from research participants. We used this technique in conjunction with other methods, including surveys, focus group discussions, and observation. The women were selected to reflect variations in age, economic status, and marital status, and the life stories were collected over a series of repeated visits, on the assumption that this would yield more meaningful data as the relationship between the researchers and research participants developed.

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Our experience revealed that some of the attributes and advantages of the life history approach as outlined in the literature are problematic in practical field settings. For example, life history research has been acknowledged for its humanising (Peacock and Holland 1993), and empowering (Anderson and Jack 1991) functions. The method has also been portrayed as providing research participants with the opportunity to tell their stories on their own terms (Anderson and Jack 1991). But our work with rural African women reveals that there are limits to the extent to which these aspects of the methodology can be realised. This article highlights the limitations concerning the structure of the interview, research bias, and associated power relations in gender-sensitive research conducted using life history research methods, and explores the influence of the research setting on opportunities and challenges for conducting life history research. The article also suggests practical solutions to overcoming these limitations based on our experiences, drawn as they are from research conducted in a specific historical, geographical, and spatial context. The aim is to contribute to the debate and existing literature on the issues and dilemmas of applying the life history method, and to debates around gender research methodology in the context of HIV and AIDS in Africa.

What is the 'life history' approach?

The life stories that are elicited as a result of the life history approach are 'reconstructions of [a] person's experiences, remembered and told at a particular point in their lives, to a particular researcher/audience and for a particular purpose: all of which will have a bearing on how the stories are told, which stories are told, and how they are presented or interpreted' (Etherington 2006, 234). Through life stories, a whole life is told using careful interviewing techniques (Leydesdorff 1999). Just as the story is very important, so too is how well it is told (Hatch and Wisniewski 1995). The extent to which this is possible is determined by the ability of the researcher to work closely with the research participant in exploring and recording the story. This is because there are many ways of eliciting a story, as well as telling it (Bertaux and Kohli 1984).

Literature on the life history method highlights several advantages to this approach. These include having the effect of 'humanising' the research subject (McKeown *et al.* 2006), revealing history and culture as lived, and enabling the researcher to know the research participant better, and to ask relevant questions (Peacock and Holland 1993). The approach allows for a more in-depth exploration of a particular situation, as it generates knowledge characterised by multiple voices, perspectives, truths, and meanings (Etherington 2006). Life history research can have a 'recuperative role' (Frank 2000, cited in Etherington 2006) for individuals who participate, and by extension, their relationships, and the societies in which they live. In this way, the process becomes a 'moral act' (Frank 1995, cited in Etherington

2006): a person narrating a life story may benefit from the opportunity to talk about their own life in their own words to the researcher, and may benefit from the empathy and the unique audience which the life story interaction provides. Other research techniques such as surveys or focus group discussions do not offer this opportunity.

Life history research also brings the researcher into the same emotional and social space as the storyteller (Osella and Osella 2006), thereby narrowing the power gap between the researcher and the research participant. Life stories are also advantageous since they help to provide the reader with an insider's view of a society in a particular historical era (Edgerton and Langness 1974). Life history gives freedom and flexibility for both researcher and participant (Anderson and Jack 1991), in addition to giving meaning to life events such as births, marriages, and deaths (Schroots and Assink 2006). Additionally, life stories help to put individuals' experiences within a context of a wider web of meanings (Leydesdorff 1999), thereby revealing the links between individual or group problems and their context. For example, it is possible to trace and compare the roots of a problem such as gender inequality among different groups of people in the meanings they attach to individual experiences. Life history research methods have been found valuable for generating new insights into women's experiences not generated through other research techniques, since women's experiences are often ignored, or silenced, especially in a situation where they are at variance with those of men (Anderson and Jack 1991).

Putting life history research methods into practice

Structuring the interview using probe questions

As a way of empowering research participants, it is normal to begin any life history interview by giving the person being interviewed a chance to tell their life story. But in telling their life story, interviewees sometimes fail to talk about certain areas that the researcher considers important to their topic of study. So to mitigate this, most researchers use lists of probe questions to guide life history interviews. In this case, our 'probe lists' included questions about Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), civil war, and Independence, all significant events in the histories of both countries. We expected that these events would have shaped the research participants' lives, and assumed that they would hold a significant place in their life stories. However, our field experience highlighted that such allocentric (collective) events carried very limited meaning to individuals, and respondents rarely structured their memories around them. Some people were found to be too old to relate to recent events, and others were too young to know anything about events that had happened in the past. In other contexts, researchers may find generalised probe lists to be very helpful. But in our experience, the generalised probe lists that we used proved to be of limited use, because the circumstances that structured the experiences and memories (and their interpretation) of the individuals who participated in our research differed widely.

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Individuals' life stories are unique. They are based on the magnitude of their life experiences, and include memories of trauma, and of delight. In this research, people told their stories according to what struck *them* as important, as revealed by the following excerpt¹:

Question: *What can you tell me about your grandparents' lives?*

Response: *What I can remember is that when I was 5 years old my grandparent [father's aunt] took me from my parents. I went to live with her and her husband in Mityana [a distant village]. She raised me there and life was good. They took me to school and I studied up to class 4. At that point, my grandmother had problems in that marriage so she quit and both of us returned here. My father then began to pay my school fees but unfortunately, that year he was knocked down by a car and killed.*

Question: *Which year was that?*

Response: *It was in the late 50s or early 60s.*

Question: *Was it before or after Independence?*

Response: *I can't exactly tell. However, what I remember is that I dropped out of school because that same year my own mother also divorced my father and got married to another man. I stayed here for two more years then I got married. Unfortunately, my marriage just like that of my grandmother and mother was a failure . . .*

Our research revealed that in this context, individual events such as marriage, childbirth, and death give important insights into the life of a particular narrator. Each person's interpretation of their history changes as they move through life. Particular circumstances or life processes influence not only the way a person tells their story but also how the researcher elicits the same. Some episodes or circumstances have more biographical relevance than others. For women in this study these included family events such as death, birth, initiation ceremonies (naming, marriage, and religious ceremonies), and events that undermined or strengthened the welfare of their families. Some of the most striking issues that come out of the above excerpt are the death of the respondent's father, and the break up of her grandmother's marriage, her parents' marriage, and then her own marriage.

There is no doubt that in this social and geographical context, the primary concern for most women, particularly mothers, is the welfare of their family (Kakuru 2000). For this reason, any events that occur at the level of the family have a significant influence on the woman narrator's life story. In light of this, life history gender research that is aimed at supporting women's empowerment is likely to be more successful if it encourages women to talk about individual and family events. These can then be contextualised in a wider web of meanings. So for instance, in the study villages, memories of deaths related to HIV and AIDS, and the associated suffering and trauma, were easily retrieved from women, mainly because of the disruptions that such events caused in the narrators' lives. Our experience was that probes evolved from the

unfolding of individual narratives. General probes may be quite limiting, since nobody can anticipate what information the narrator will be willing to give or withhold.

Participants' willingness to disclose information

The extent to which research participants were forthcoming with information also varied between individuals. Some research participants shocked us by 'diving into the deep end' on exposing their HIV positive status and sex work activities, both of which are highly stigmatised in the rural setting where the research took place. In such a situation, the researcher may be unsure of whether to suppress or ignore such information, or to follow up on it. One of the authors had an initial meeting with a woman who straightaway began to divulge detailed stories about her sex work activities. The language she used was so graphic that the author was shocked into silence. Retrospectively, the author realises she was shocked because of her own background, moral stance, and the assumptions that she had about sex workers as illegal and immoral women. As a result, the author failed to probe the woman any further, and resolved not to conduct any more interviews with this woman. Looking back, the author realises that her actions marginalised the narrator, and that she lost an opportunity to generate an insightful life story.

Researchers working in rural communities in Uganda and Zimbabwe should not underestimate awareness of HIV and AIDS, or overestimate stigma towards those affected by the disease. We were frequently informed that deceased family members had died from AIDS, pneumonia, meningitis, and other opportunistic infections normally associated with the pandemic, without any probing. For instance, one woman revealed in the first interview that she had been infected with HIV for twelve years but had no AIDS-related illness. This was the first time that we had met, and talked to, people living with HIV and AIDS. That people were so open to talking about the disease came as a big shock, and we were often unprepared for such revelations, and were not even ready to take notes or probe further, particularly when we had categorised the topic as 'sensitive', to be discussed in subsequent meetings. Although we were distressed by these stories, they provided us with the opportunity to gain an insight into the impact of HIV and AIDS, and other real life experiences.

The authors attribute people's willingness to talk openly about sensitive issues to two factors: the fact that we were 'outsiders', and the effect of HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns. In Uganda for example community-based HIV and AIDS education and behavioural change interventions are commonplace in rural areas (see Mitchell *et al.* 2001). It is also possible that research participants anticipated that we would be able to help them in some way, since ordinarily outsiders in such situations are associated with the provision of assistance. Although the exact motive for our informants' cooperation cannot be determined, the experience provides useful insights into the relationship between reality and assumptions that researchers have about similar communities.

On the other hand, some research participants were unwilling to divulge information that we took to be common knowledge in the village. For example, one elderly couple who lived with a bedridden son allegedly living with AIDS denied any knowledge of or experience with HIV and AIDS. The situation poses a dilemma for the researcher, of whether to probe until what you understand as the true situation is revealed, or respect people's right to decide on what information to divulge, and leave well alone. For research participants are of course under no obligation to reveal their situation to a 'visitor'. A similar dilemma arose when we talked to the bedridden and terminally ill. Should the researcher try to ask as many questions as possible in the available time, or stay away out of respect? One could argue that a good way of ending the life stories of such seriously ill/dying patients would have been to hear their advice to other people who are HIV negative, and to know whether they express any regrets. How to achieve this without stigmatising or even hurting the respondent was difficult. This and other similar situations raised some tough ethical dilemmas for both authors.

Who sets the agenda?

Our field experience revealed that the life story interview agenda is not always determined by the researcher. Sometimes we would arrive for an appointment to find the research participant entertaining visitors, in the middle of a funeral, or having a family meeting. In these situations, we would explain to the participant that we would not interview that day, but would request to be allowed to remain and just observe. Normally such requests were granted. This retreat into observation allowed us to analyse the narrator's life, and enriched our research by enabling us to view her interacting with other people, and her role in the family set-up. As such, it was a way of checking the life story data. As observers, we were able to find out things about the research participant that for some reason might not have been revealed in her life story interview; this way certain inconsistencies would be explained. These included family problems, revelation of the paternity of the participant's children, and the relationship between the participant and other people in her family or community. As such, these opportunities to observe enriched the life story data by providing more information, filling gaps, and resolving inconsistencies. But they also highlighted ethical dilemmas in instances where we found out things that the participant may have been deliberately concealing.

Researcher bias

In this paper, 'researcher bias' is understood not so much as the freedom individual researchers have to look at the social world in a personal way (Mehra 2002), but rather as their tendency to 'overstretch'; that freedom when making decisions in the research process. It is important for qualitative researchers to make their biases explicit and

acknowledge how these biases dictate question selection, frameworks for coding data, and so on (Sells *et al.* 1997).

Women researching women

The advantages of research by women about women are many. For example, women in some cultures are less reticent to speak their minds to fellow women compared with men (Kits and Roberts 1996). This arrangement therefore opens doors for women research participants to speak on their own. In other societies, married women are forbidden to entertain unknown male visitors of any kind (Manderson 1994). As a result, women researchers may be better placed to elicit information from women informants, particularly concerning sensitive issues (Kits and Roberts 1996). Nevertheless, we would also argue that research by women about women is particularly prone to specific bias, blind spots, and other limitations that female researchers may not easily recognise on their own.

The authors are educated, married, and practising Christians. These were sources of bias that, we now realise, influenced the whole research process. For example, we were apprehensive about interviewing younger unmarried, widowed, divorced, or deserted single women, because in our opinion, such women represented a threat to other marriages in the village, and symbolically, to our own marriages. On reflection, we realised that we were biased against informants with different, or socially stigmatised, marital status. This influenced our interaction with, and interpretation and analysis of the research participants' life stories. As married women, we empathised more with women in the village who were in 'morally acceptable' relationships with men, and with women whose husbands were engaged in extra-marital affairs. As a result, we realise that we spent more time with, and elicited more information from, research participants of socially accepted marital status. The authors' reflection also revealed that participants equally had their own suspicions about our potential biases. For example, some attempted to hide their marital status: women engaged in extra-marital relationships concealed this information from the authors, perhaps based on their own judgements of our dispositions.

Much as research by women about women has numerous advantages, as outlined above, it also has limitations, which female researchers need to keep in mind. All researchers, women and men, need to be aware that their values and worldviews are shaped by, amongst other influences, their own gender biases, and that these can intervene with the story-collecting process. Researchers thus need to try and detach themselves from these personal influences.

The importance of organising research activities to suit participants' lives

The nature of rural livelihoods in Africa today means that women who are heads of household have to juggle many activities to make ends meet. As a result, women we wished to interview were not always present in the village when we arrived. Hence,

we spent more time with the less mobile and sedentary women. In the process, we lost opportunities to explore the experiences of the more mobile ones. This highlights the need for researchers in such a setting to arrange life story research to accommodate the different life styles of respondents, in order to reflect the diversity of narrators' lived experiences.

Power

One of the advantages of undertaking qualitative research, such as Life History interviews, is to give research subjects a voice, while enabling the researcher to hear this voice (Downie and Cottrell 2001). However, it is important to acknowledge the power dynamics in the relationship between the researcher and the research participant: researchers are more powerful than their informants. This is because researchers' identities and characteristics influence the research questions, subject selection, how the informant responds, the rating of those responses, the analysis, and the conclusions drawn from the life stories. Some people agreed to participate in the research because of the respect we commanded; we indirectly invaded their lives and unconsciously compelled them to consent to participate in the research. Although in our experience there seemed to be mutual respect between the researchers and research participants, we now recognise that power differences remained apparent in the entire research process.

For instance, in addition to placing us in a position where we could decide to spend more time interviewing narrators who, in our opinion, led more 'morally appropriate' lifestyles, power relations in the sampling process also influenced issues of trust between the researcher and research participant. In some cases, the authors made decisions to drop participants based on our value judgments regarding the level of trust between ourselves and the participants. These included participants who were slow in divulging information, too crude, or whose stories we found 'boring'. This implies that as researchers, we often assumed that our subjects would progress or move at more or less the same pace with regard to building a relationship of trust with us, as measured by the amount and quality of the information they were prepared to reveal. But this was not necessarily the case, and we now realise that the failure of some informants to 'cooperate' could be a result of lack of trust in us as researchers, a lack of confidence, or intimidation by others in the social setting. In cases where respondents did cooperate, we realised that it was easier to probe once trust had been established, and interviews became more relaxed. In these cases, the quality of interaction between the researcher and research participant improved. The paradox is that this situation arises at the tail end of the research process. The challenge is to balance the time limits and the patience and time needed to establish trust and rapport between the researcher and participant.

Neutrality

It is also a challenge to be neutral in relating to research participants. In the areas where the research was conducted, as would be the case in many other parts of Africa, we were received as visitors, not as researchers. As Africans ourselves we were addressed as sister, mother, granddaughter or aunt by the narrators. As a result, it became increasingly difficult to maintain a neutral stance, as we were drawn into the family situation. With time, research participants began to turn to us for advice and assistance with family problems, personal dilemmas, and life decisions. Examples include women who shared their resentment of their daughters' illegitimate children, who they were raising, and a mother who suspected her adult daughter of witchcraft. In such circumstances, it is a challenge for researchers to remain neutral while empathising with research participants.

Triangulation

Triangulation is defined by Deizin as 'the combination of methodology in the study of [the] same phenomenon' (1978, 271 cited in Jick 1979), i.e. the use of different research methods to study the same material. The belief is that multiple viewpoints allow for greater accuracy: the convergence of different methods enhances the validity of the results, allows the researcher to be more confident of their results, and enriches the explanation of the research problem (Jick 1979). Life stories are often collected to triangulate other data sources. The authors' experience revealed that life stories themselves could be triangulated, through interaction with people other than the research participant. However, some informants volunteered information about research participants in the form of gossip, and most volunteered information was negative. Inconsistencies arose in the form of different versions of the story told by the research participant, or different versions of an aspect of an individual's story as told by neighbours, children, or other family members. This mostly happened when we encountered a research participant's children or family members in their absence. The inconsistencies posed methodological dilemmas to the authors, but in some cases the information 'ironed out' inconsistencies in the life story interviews. Inconsistent stories normally occurred at the beginning of the research process but most were resolved in time. The retreat into observation and interaction with the narrators' family and kin all provide opportunities to explain inconsistencies and enhance the quality of the life story.

Conclusion

Life history research has a number of advantages, including the capacity to empower research subjects by giving them an opportunity to tell their story on their own terms. Life History research by women about women provides additional empowerment for

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women research participants in societies where such informants would not be very comfortable talking to male researchers, or where this is forbidden. However, limitations exist because the life stories that are collected during research are influenced by the history and context in which they occur and are told. In this article, we have highlighted issues that women researchers studying women need to keep in mind in order to avoid the influence of researcher bias and interview structure on their results. There is a general need for flexibility, particularly in structuring interviews. It is also important to triangulate data collection methods as well as research subjects. Researchers also need to be aware of their biases, both implicit and explicit, and to take them into account during data processing. Life history research in African village settings provides unique methodological and contextual experiences that can enrich the quality of the interview, as revealed in this paper.

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Note

- 1 Taken from a life history interview conducted in Luweero, Uganda, September 2004.

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