

The contribution of children's biographies and biographical narratives to children's friendship

Yifan Shi

Xi'an Kedagaoxin University, Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, 710100

ABSTRACT

The development of children's research has changed the image of children's life in people's minds, which in turn requires some adjustments in children's research. This means that this adjustment is not only in the research content, but also in the research methods. For example, in the traditional children's research, children usually play the role of research object, but with the development of children's research, children can participate in the research object and express their true thoughts on their personal life. Research on biography provides a methodological possibility for directly listening to children's views on their own lives. In this essay, first of all, I will discuss that the extent to which children have biographies depends on different child research theories. Next, I will explain the characteristics, usefulness and limitations of biographical methods, all of which are inseparable from the outstanding views of childhood researchers. Then, I will discuss the application of biographical methods in children's research, and evaluate the benefits and problems in practical application. Finally, I will discuss the usefulness of using biographical methods to study children's friendship, as well as the potential of further using biographical methods in the future. Finally, the report concludes that biographical research is a method that is constantly acquired over time. It enables children to reflect on their own lives in order to understand past problems and their significance to the present and the future.

KEYWORDS

children; biography; children's friendship

1 To what extent do children have biographies?

Wilson et al. (2007) argues that biographies is about a person's life history, or a certain part of his life. Including the changing experiences and views of specific individuals in their daily life, and how to understand their past, present and future. In addition, it also includes stories and memories that a person shares about himself and others. In this essay, the children's biographies refers to children's own biography, which is different from adults' own childhood narration. However, in the traditional sense, only great and outstanding people can have biographies, especially adults. A major criticism of James's work that assumes that children also have biographies in their personal lives. Although children's life and experience are less than those of adults, they are also experiencing a constantly changing social and material environment in childhood. Nevertheless, discussing the theory of children's growth from the perspective of biography has not been paid much attention. On the one hand, the growth of children can be simply summarized as physical changes and intellectual development. On the other hand, children's growth is inseparable from the upbringing of adults, which leads adults to think that they have more say in children's growth experience, while

children's voices describing their own life experiences and physical changes are ignored. In this case, the extent to which children have biographies depends on different theories of children's studies, because different theories influence people's thinking about who has the right to talk more about children's life experiences, whether children or adults. Traditional sociological interest in children and childhood is related to socialization theory. Children are defined as individuals with "incomplete maturity" and "primitive destructive instinct" and this destructive instinct of children needs to be channeled through social channels, so children need socialization (Corsaro, 2011). In other words, children have the instincts of destruction, and their intrusion will break the original social structure. Children need to be domesticated by adults if they want to enter the society. Therefore, one of the responsibilities of adults is to discipline children with destructive instincts into the society (Prout, 2005). There are two modes in the process of socialization of children. One is the decisive model, in which children plays a negative role. They are regarded as potential newcomers who can maintain the social structure. They must be trained strictly to eliminate their threat to society and make them easy to control. The other is the constructive mode, in which children are regarded as active subjects and knowledge seekers, and children actively construct their own world. Thus, these two theories have given two different meanings to children's biography (Corsaro, 2011).

From the point of view of the decisive model, Children's biographies are constructed and decided by adults to a great extent. Because this socialization theory conceptualizes children's cognition under the dualistic framework of "children-adults", "nature-culture" and "simplicity-complexity". It connects children with concepts of nature and simplicity, which means that children are weak and irrational individuals who need socialization (Wyse, 2004). When children are regarded as members of the society, they must be shaped and educated by external forces in order to become functional members of the society. To be specific, what adults expect their children to be in the future, and they are committed to achieving this goal. Few people regard children as individuals who are currently developing and developing, and have their own needs and desires (Uprichard, 2008). Therefore, this theory holds that children are incapable of building biographies. Children are incapable of telling their own life stories, or even experience gained from their life experiences. Whether it's the life that children are experiencing now or reviewing the major events of childhood experience and looking to the future, life stories are not worth exploring.

On the contrary, since the new childhood sociology began to pay attention to children, the meaning of "childhood" has changed. James and prout (1998) believe that children's immaturity stems from the biological significance, but in fact, children are rich in cultural significance. It means that putting children at the center of their own lives. Children have the ability and necessity to participate in their own childhood studies and describe their own lives (Smart, 2007). Therefore, we can use the perspective of biography to study children. Specifically, the new childhood sociology holds that children are an integral part of society, and they have their own cultural and social ties. They are not passive vassals of the world with adults, but the constructors of children's world and social actors who live in it, and they are constantly generating their own meaningful world (Prout and James, 2015). On the one hand, the researchers of the new childhood society pointed out that children are active and creative social groups. Actors not only construct their own unique culture and life of children, but also promote the production of adult society (Prout, 2005). In other words, children are not only social actors now, but also children at a specific time and place, and their present personal life will be affected by past experiences (James, 2013). Thus, the story of children's life exists and is worth studying. On the other hand, childhood is a kind of social structure and a part of society. In this sense, children is a members or incumbents of his childhood and childhood is the stage that they are going through at present (Prout, 2005). It means that children's personal lives are now affected by their own choices or by the choices made by others on their behalf (James, 2013). This view is supported by Wang (2014), who indicates that children must learn to understand and

integrate into their personal life experiences. Generally speaking, children has a reliable biography.

Jamieson et al(2006) point out that personal life includes all aspects of personal relationships. Similarly, the research on children's life also needs to be carried out in the fields of childhood, family and interpersonal relationships. (Smart, 2007). As two characteristics of personal life, recalling biography is an indispensable part. In sociological studies, researchers insist that the past is still important. However, Misztal(2003)proposes that the ability to remember includes more than just going back in time or gaining knowledge. This means that people need a process of selecting memory elements. Obviously, it is impossible to remember everything in a person's personal life. Therefore, people need the ability to remember, and memory is selective (Smart, 2007). In addition, Misztal(2003) highlights that people are closely related to emotions. This means that it is much easier to remember those very happy or sad events, because these emotions are all invested in an event. In addition, when new events produces the same emotions, memories of the past may reproduce similar emotions again. Therefore, memory is embedded with emotion, and emotion will also affect personal memory. At the same time, memory has profound sociality, because the formation of memory depends on the meaning and transmission of context. Just as the interest in memories related to sociology increases, we can develop biographical methods to expand and deepen the meaning of sociological imagination. The part about the child's past in the biography should not be forgotten. Because memory constitutes a biography, and it is also something special about the past that children can remember. Some of these memories are preserved in physical objects, such as photos, souvenirs and houses. However, although sociologists are inclined to studying groups, biographies tend to study individuals. Smart (2007) suggests that people can observe how society lives by observing their personal lives.

2 Biographical method

Biographical, as a qualitative research method, has been widely used in sociological research, and has been applied in many disciplines.refers to the research form of searching and utilizing personal life documents or documents describing turning points of life (Pan, 2005). Specifically, these documents include autobiographies, biographies, diaries, life stories, personal experience stories, letters, life history, etc. In addition, biographical studies focus on a person's life experience and are usually used to study its development process (Merrill and West, 2009). has obvious advantages in studying the role of personal history in the process of social development and the changes between individuals and cultural groups and between individuals and society. As biographical research focuses on life experience, attaches importance to the expression of individual subjectivity and the provision of process data, and attaches importance to the value of narrative and context, it can overcome the opposition between quantitative and qualitative research methods and avoid the separation of theoretical inquiry and experience. Therefore, it can be used as an effective communication tool to learn about individuals' life history, their historical background, and help individuals explain the events and relationships around them (Pan, 2005).

Biographical method allows researchers to treat research objects with dialectical cognitive process (Thomson, 2007). Seeing that in the detailed narration of the individual as the research object, the researcher can not only hear the narrator's recollection of his life facts, but also include the meaning and explanation of these events or stories (Thomson and Holland, 2005). Researchers can learn about all kinds of ideological activities and values that guide their behavior, as well as the social and personal psychological factors that influence their behavior from the surface and hidden backgrounds (Merrill and West, 2009). Due to the fact that a person's behavior can't be separated from the various social relations in which he lives. In other words, the individual's behavior actually

represents the collective values of a group or a class, namely "class". Therefore, participants' personal life experiences are not only special but also universal (Goodwin, 2012).

Biography can also help people to understand the various ways and means in which culture shaping individual behavior (Merrill and West, 2009). To be specific, explore how individual behavior is related to various rules of structure. For example, what does the family and society pass on to young people, and how? Moreover and then, biographical research should follow the major social changes that affect his life, such as major historical events and important life turning points (James, 2013). It means that biographical research is actually research dominated by a holistic concept (Goodwin, 2012). This holistic view is not an attempt to draw a macroscopic holistic view, but a holistic cognitive view that describes, narrates and explains a particular person's particular life experiences. Thus, this research method recognizes the view that "individuals form society and society shapes individuals".

Any research method has its limitations, and biography methods is no exception. Firstly, the data generated by biographical methods may be incomplete and limited. The most controversial thing about biography research is that it is almost impossible to study a person's whole life, and only one-sided information can be used to explain it (Pan, 2005). Specifically, on the one hand, when participants face different situations or researchers in different periods, they may make different interpretations of their own memories. Personal memory will inevitably be forgotten and selectively recalled (Smart, 2007). On the other hand, the difference of researchers' research motivation will affect their choice of research emphasis, so the data or explanations obtained by biographical research will be questioned as one-sided and limited. Secondly, in the research of biography, the authenticity of relevant content and its practicability to society are also questioned (Pan, 2005). Just like whether the subjects can finish the questionnaire seriously in quantitative research, the phenomenon of "lying" may also be encountered in the process of biography research. In other words, unlike other studies, the results of biographical studies can be used to solve problems at once. Most of the achievements of biographies are to let researchers know the life course of participants from multiple perspectives. Objectivity is also the most common controversy in qualitative research, and the doubters mainly come from positivism and value neutrality. The research content of biography are jointly constructed by researchers and participants. Because biography attach importance to the characteristics of individual subjectivity, it will inevitably involve subjective thoughts or emotions (Thomson, 2007). Moreover, absolute objectivity does not exist, because the pure objectivity that does not depend on people has been overturned by the latest scientific research results on more and more occasions.

3 The utility of biographical methods in childhood studies

In recent decades, children's research in different disciplines has enriched the content and theme of children's research, and at the same time promoted the diversification of research methods. Among them, the biographical method of social studies has played an important role in the field of children's studies. Although biography has its limitations, there are lots of reasons of it is suitable for children's studies. Due to the fact that it is a child-centered research paradigm (Thomson et al, 2004). In other words, the change of children's research content and methods implies the change of the relationship between researchers and children, and the change of researchers' attitude towards children is recessive. Especially the content of children's research has influenced the choice of children's research methods to some extent (Prout and James, 2015). For example, early childhood research focused on medicine and psychology, so children's research focused on experimental methods and observational methods. However, the early research methods on children have caused

some harm to children. In early research, researchers tend to regard children as research objects and research objects that are almost indistinguishable from small animals. Nowadays, many scholars regard children as the main body of discussion. Children appear as the images of activities in research, which means that children are more qualified to describe their own lives (Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2011; Prout and James, 2015). In this case, biographical research is conducive to a direct understanding of children's views, and it can ensure the realization of a child-centered research methods.

Another important reason for increasing the use of biographical methods in children's research is that biographical methods are a way to help children to reflect on their life course. The significance of biographical method is not to provide rich information for research. Excessive concern for data means another form of commercialization and deification. The significance of this study is to show the development and complexity of the topic of telling and listening (Bagnoli, 2004). In other words, biography is not only a simple restatement of children's past experiences, but also a reflection of children's experience of being in their personal lives and the experiences of major events in their lives. In addition, biographical method is also a subjective method, and children can reflect on themselves and understand others through autobiographical way, to realize self-reconstruction and subject liberation (Aleandri and Russo, 2015). Specifically, children who are both subjects of research can rediscover themselves, know themselves and build themselves by telling their personal life stories (Bagnoli, 2004). The application of biography helps to discover the personal, social and cultural significance of the key events in children's lives, and in this way, children can gain life experience (Thomson, 2007).

The biography method promotes the relationship between researchers and children to be equal and friendly gradually. As one of the research methods of sociology, biography pays more attention to participants' personal lives (James, 2013). In early research on children, researchers usually regard children as the object of study, but do not regard them as individuals with the same personality as researchers (Scott, 2000). Therefore, the relationship between researchers and children is not equal. The researcher has absolute right to speak. Children are just in the situation where they are being tested, observed and questioned, and their rights are nowhere to be implemented (Prout and James, 2015). With the development of the research on children's new society, people's understanding of children has changed, and children have gradually become individuals with unique personalities in the field of general public awareness. In the research, researchers gradually respect children's rights (Prout, 2005). In addition, researchers regard children as people who make contributions to the research, and researchers and children tend to form a friendly friend. After the end of the study, some researchers and children who participate in the study still kept a communication relationship (Prout, 2005). At the same time, biographical method can listen to children's life experience when studying their personal life. It means that this friendly relationship also promotes researchers to better understand children, and thus gain profound insights into children's life experience.

4 The implementation of biographical methods in childhood studies

Longitudinal study of biographical methods provides the possibility to witness children's changes with time (Bagnoli, 2009). Biography, as the material carrier of socialization of children, will change with time. Bray et al. (2014) conducted a ten-year follow-up of children's biographical experiences, encouraging children to explore their adaptation period and opportunities to develop rich biographies. In this research, the participants' physical and accompanying experience are crucial to the development of children's self-awareness and identity. After the operation, children

improved their self-control ability, thus changed their self-concept, which also provides them with the opportunity to develop rich biographies. Specifically, after the operation, children seem to have positive ideas about his growth experience and how to grow into adults. For example, years of surgical experience has increased their independence and reduced the dependence of adults on their care. Surgery has become a turning point in children's lives. At the same time, the occurrence of this major event has a more positive impact on children's future life.

However, there are some obvious limitations in biographical research. For children with mental or physical disabilities, their biographies may be interrupted (Bagnoli, 2009; Bray et al, 2014). Specifically, children with mental disabilities may be unable to describe their life experiences during this period (Bagnoli, 2009). For example, for children with physical disabilities, after a failed operation, the expected trajectory of the disease is disrupted, and children suffers trauma or disturbing difficulties (Bray et al., 2014). In this case, children's patients may stop constructing realistic biographies of their postoperative life after disappointment, which leads to the interruption of biographies.

5 Biographical approaches' contributions to researching children's experiences of friendship

Children's friendship experience has attracted the attention of many researchers in the field of childhood research, and biographical methods may be very helpful. The biographical nature of children's life and the diversity of children's friendships mean that biographical research methods can provide profound experiences for children on how to experience different aspects of friendship. The advantages and application characteristics of some biographical research methods have been identified before, so this part will explain how biographical research can be applied in children's friendship in combination with the issue of children's friendship.

The multi-faceted nature of children's friendship includes the development of children's concept of friendship, gender differences, age differences, children's understanding of friendship, and children's peer acceptance and rejection in the group (Wang, 2014). At present, some commonly used research methods, such as observation, interview and questionnaire, are mostly used in the research related to children's friendship, to observe children's friendship behavior, to ask children's views on friends and friendship, or to distribute questionnaires to parents and teachers in order to know the present situation of children's friendship. Although some studies adopt research methods that are closer to children, these studies still regard children as passive research objects, and they cannot dig deep into their true thoughts. Biography can directly focus on children's friendship life experiences, such as studying children's personal biographies and sharing such shared biography, which is very important to deepen understanding of children's friendship experiences (Davies, 2015).

Good peer relationship is of great significance to children's childhood development. In recent years, the research on children's friendship lacks understanding friendship from children's point of view. However, biographical research is child-centered, and children are invited to be the subject of research. Therefore, biographical studies are aware of the importance of child orientation. This is supported by Punch(2016) Who indicates that child-oriented is not only the basic principle of modern education, but also the basic feature of an ideal society. Similarly, Wyse(2004) also believes that children's perspective emphasizes children's dominant position should be highlighted in educational research. Research methods that can give full play to children's advantages should be adopted, so that children can participate in projects and express their experience, cognition and understanding of the life world. Therefore, as a researcher, we should not only regard children as

capable, creative and subjective individuals, but also regard children as the subject of research rather than the object of research. In this kind of research, both children and adults are the objects of study. In the research, children actively show their descriptions of friendship, instead of passively being asked and measuring how many friends they have. Therefore, through biographical research, children can realize their inner world's understanding of the influence of friendship on the development of friendship and show their initiative in friendship.

The use of biography is that it is a means to promote children to reflect on their own life course. Friendship is a special kind of companion relationship between two individuals, which is long-term and intimate. It means that the research on children's friendship needs long-term follow-up and then the research results can be obtained. Liberian and Shaw (2018) believe that the function of friendship is to confirm or share hope, share fear, affirm self-worth and provide opportunities for love and intimacy. The social needs of children in close friendship are different from those of ordinary peer groups (Ferrer and Fugate, 1969). Because close friends will get more love, intimacy, and alliance. In addition, friendship is beneficial to the development of children's self-concept and personality. When children encounter troubles, confusion, tension and anxiety in their personal lives, for example, after venting their bad feelings to their peers, they get comfort and sympathy from their peers, and they will reduce or eliminate their negative feelings (Davies and Aron, 2016). It means that understanding children's friendship has always occupied an important place in their present life, in their past and future (Davies, 2015). Thus, if children want to maintain a long-term friendship, they need to reflect on how to give and receive help and how to resolve conflicts and hostility.

Biography has great potential for better understand children's friendship experiences. One of the important reason is that it allows participants to relive the key moments and relationships in their lives (Bagnoli, 2004). Friendship is the main social relationship between children's peers, and it is also an important condition for the healthy development of children's psychology during their growing up. It is found that the friendship quality of teenagers has a high correlation with their self-esteem, self-worth, depression, anxiety and even social adaptation in adulthood, and the friendship quality has a profound impact on teenagers' social development and even lifelong development (Davies and Aron, 2016). Children may meet different types of friends in the past, present and future, because children will get new friendships at every stage, and of course they will also have a fixed peer relationship. However, every friend's memory and mood may be different at every stage. It means that children can capture a specific event in a biography with their peers through the timeline or life story work in biographical research, or capture multiple meanings of peers in different periods (Davies, 2015). Therefore, biographical research has realized children's orderly description of intimate relationships in their personal lives or intentions (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006).

6 Conclusion

This essay has discussed why children have biographies, and the application and implementation of biographical research methods in children's studies, and how to promote the research of biographical approaches in the present and future fields of children's friendship. Specifically, the concept of New Childhood Sociology points out that children are positive and creative social actors. At the same time, children's personal life will be affected by their past experiences. Thus, children's life stories exist and have reliable biographies. Then, by paying attention to children, helping them to reflect on their own life course, the biographical research method is applied to children's life. Although there are limitations of limited materials, authenticity and objectivity of content, the

longitudinal study of biographies provides children with the possibility of changing with time. The proposal and application of biographical approaches are of positive significance for listening to children and developing child-centered research methods. Biographical research involves important moments in children's lives and their past experiences, which may bring meaning to their future lives. Longitudinal research can provide an opportunity for children to participate, and also for researchers to get new ideas. However, the application of biography in children's friendship is not sufficient, and most of the research directions focus on children's present friendship. The researchers hopes to make a time-tracking study of children's friendship, considering the past, present and future of children, combining the nature of biography.

References

- [1] Aleandri G. and Russo V. 2015. Autobiographical Questionnaire and Semi-structured Interview: Comparing two Instruments for Educational Research in Difficult Contexts. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 197, pp.514-524.
- [2] Bagnoli A. 2004. Researching Identities with Multi-method Autobiographies. *Sociological Research Online* . 9 (2), pp.1-15.
- [3] Bagnoli A. 2009. Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts- based methods. *Qualitative Research* . 9 (5), pp.547-570.
- [4] Bray, L.Kirk, S. Callery, P. 2014. Developing biographies: the experiences of children, young people and their parents of living with a long-term condition. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 36(6), pp.823-839.
- [5] Corsaro W. 2011. *The sociology of childhood*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- [6] Davies H. 2015. *Understanding children's personal lives and relationships*. Basingstoke :Palgrave Macmillan.
- [7] Davies K. and Aron A. 2016. Friendship Development and Intergroup Attitudes: The Role of Interpersonal and Intergroup Friendship Processes. *Journal of Social Issues*, 72(3), pp.489-510.
- [8] Ferrer M. and Fugate A. 1969. The Importance of Friendship for School-Age Children. *EDIS*, 2003(11).
- [9] Gauntlett D. and Holzwarth P. 2006. Creative and visual methods for exploring identities. *Visual Studies*, 21(1), pp.82-91.
- [10] Goodwin J. 2012. *SAGE Biographical Research*. London: SAGE.
- [11] Gottlieb, D and Bronstein, P. 1996. Parents' Perceptions of Children's Worries in a Changing.
- [12] Jamieson L., Morgan D., Crow G. and Allan G. 2006. Friends, Neighbours and Distant Partners: Extending or Decentering Family Relationships?. *Sociological Research Online*, 11(3), pp.39-47.
- [13] James A. 2013. *Socialising children*. Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan.
- [14] James, A. Jenks, C and Prout, A. 1998. *Theorizing Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [15] Liberman Z. and Shaw A. 2018. Secret to friendship: Children make inferences about friendship based on secret sharing. *Developmental Psychology*, 54(11), pp.2139-2151.
- [16] Merrill, B and West, L. 2009. *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- [17] Misztal B. 2003. *Theories of social remembering*. Buckingham :Open University Press.
- [18] Punch S. 2016. Exploring Children's Agency across Majority and Minority World Contexts. In: Esser, F., Baader M., Betz, T. and Hungerland, B. eds. *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge, pp.183-196.
- [19] Prout A. 2005. *The future of childhood : towards the interdisciplinary study of children*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- [20] Prout A. & James A. 2015. A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood?: Provenance, promise and problems. In: Allison James, A. P. (ed.) *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*. London: Routledge, pp. 6-28.
- [21] Pan H. 2005. *Experiences in educational research: concepts and applications*. Shanghai: East China Normal University and Research Press.
- [22] Smart C. 2007. *Personal life: new directions in sociological thinking* . Cambridge: Polity.
- [23] Scott J. 2000. Children as Respondents. The Challenge for Qualitative Methods. In: Christensen, P. and James, A. ed. *Research with Children, Perspectives and Practices*. London: The Falmer Press, pp. 98-119.
- [24] Thomson, R, Holland, J, McGrellis, S, Bell, R, Henderson, S and Sharpe, S. 2004. *Inventing adulthoods: a biographical*

- approach to understanding youth citizenship. *The Sociological Review*. 52 (2), pp.218-239.
- [25] Thomson R. 2007. A biographical perspective. In: Kehily, M J. *Understanding youth: perspectives, identities and practices*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 73-106.
- [26] Thomson, R and Holland, J. 2005. Thanks for the memory': memory books as a methodological resource in biographical research. *Qualitative Research*. 5 (2), pp.201-219.
- [27] Uprichard E. 2008. Children as 'Being and Becomings': Children, Childhood and Temporality. *Children & Society*. 22 (4), pp.303-313.
- [28] Wang Y. 2014. *The relationship between researcher and child - an examination based on modern Western disciplinary developments and methodological developments*. M.A. Thesis, Nanjing Normal University.
- [29] Wilson, S. Cunningham-Burley, S. Bancroft A., Backett-Milburn, K. Masters, H. 2007. Young people, biographical narratives and the life grid: young people's accounts of parental substance use. *Qualitative Research*, 7(1), pp.135-151.
- [30] Wyse D. 2004. *Childhood studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.