

Robert L. Miller (2000) **Researching Life Stories and Family Histories. Introducing Qualitative Methods**. Sage Publications. 172 pages.

Anmeldt af: *Egill H. Bragason*, cand. psych., Iceland

The Sage Publishers continue to publish useful books in the series introducing qualitative methods. One of the latest books is Robert L. Miller's "Researching Life Stories and Family Histories". This book is a welcome addition to qualitative methodology, as it covers a topic that is gradually gaining more momentum in the qualitative field. The book contains a scholarly text that focuses on theory and practice alike, and will certainly be useful for a number of reasons.

Much qualitative research and qualitative methodology in psychology and sociology have focused on the life experiences of individuals in a given situation, and at a given time. In contrast, the life history and the family history approach focuses on the psychological development of individuals and family groups over a whole lifetime, or even over several generations. The main contrast is of course the greater time span that is involved in the latter approach. The main advantage of a psychological focus involving a long time span in family and life history research is that the researcher becomes able to "put it all together" in a larger context. Ideally this means that significant life events are described as naturally tied together in a whole-life pattern that should be easily digested by the reader. In contrast, an atomistic focus on single life experiences and episodes may give an insight into a person's life at a specific time, but without connection to the whole life course of that individual. The question of focus then becomes a choice between the larger and general and the smaller and specific. The choice of approach naturally depends on what will best suit the purpose of the researcher and the research project.

Robert L. Miller starts his book with a comment on how a biographical perspective on the person has been slowly taking place during the past decades, and he states that this has really been like a quiet and peaceful revolution in many branches of the social sciences. It is true that the biographical approach is nothing new in psychology, it was well known and used in case histories by Sigmund Freud in his development of psychoanalysis, and also by Jung, Reich and other prominent theorists in psychoanalysis. In sociology, Durkheim, Engels and others used life histories to illustrate social and class development in the 19th century. What is new here is the present move away from an atomistic perspective on individuals toward qualitative research on family and life histories, often involving a discursive approach, where the whole social environment is taken into account. The implicit assumption underlying this school of thought is that a person should be understood in the context of his or her whole life history. This focus is in agreement with much of activity theory, for example writers like Leontjev, viewing a person both as the creator and the product of the whole social environment. Admittedly, the line between sociology and psychology, and even fields like history and phi-

losophy, may become thin and obscure using this approach, unless the researcher has clearly demarcated and planned his or her project and keeps within the limits of a single academic discipline.

In this book, Robert L. Miller undertakes an ambitious project: to synthesise in a single text the streams of biographical research that have developed independently up to this time. Miller takes the view that three different approaches to biographical research may be identified: the *realist* approach, the *neo-positivist* approach, and the *narrative* approach. Each of the three approaches gives different views and insights into a person's life. The narrative approach focuses on the process of constructing a view of reality, mutually done by the researcher and the research subject. The neo-positivist approach involves the construction of a pre-existing conceptual framework, which is then subjected to empirical testing. The realist approach has its roots in grounded theory, and involves the discovery and construction of concepts and models directly from the data, i.e. usually qualitative interview or observation material obtained by a researcher and a research subject in co-operation.

The structure of the book is the following. In the first chapter, Miller introduces the different techniques of obtaining and constructing life histories and family histories and gives examples of how these techniques are presently used in qualitative research in the social sciences. In the second chapter, "The Historical Context", the author focuses on the element of time and how time is a central and often neglected thing in understanding life and family histories. In this chapter, the concepts of age, generation and significant life periods are defined and explained. The third chapter is concerned with the collection and organisation of material relating to family histories. A basic theme in this chapter is to expel the myth that people are independent individuals who can be understood without a reference to their families and social collectivities. The fourth chapter has the collection of life histories as its main objective, with main emphasis on methods and how methods will influence results. This chapter contains very useful and practical step-to-step guides for doing research that are useful for the beginner as well as the more experienced researcher. In order to show the difference between the three different research approaches (the narrative, the realist and the neo-positivist) a series of interviews were done with one individual, who serves as a prototype for the three different methods. The chapter contains an exercise for people who want to try their hand at real-life interviewing. In the fifth chapter, Miller discusses methodological issues that become prominent as a result of the three different research approaches. The goal of analysis is different in the three different approaches described above, and this chapter is very useful because it helps a person who is planning research to choose the approach that is most suitable to his or her research goal. In the sixth and final chapter, Miller presents a summary of the learnings and the message of the book, and puts much of what was said in earlier chapters into a greater theoretical and philosophical context. He argues for the usefulness of the biographical approach in the social sciences and how this approach may often mean that a researcher will be able to transcend the barriers of self, society, past, present and the future. Miller's argument is that this transcendence of many hindrances, obtained by the use of the biographical approach to life and family histories, will gradually open up new horizons and avenues for advances in sociological, and one may add: psychological, conceptualisation.

This book has several positive aspects. First, it contains several exercises and practical guidelines on how to carry out family and life story research. The importance of these exercises can hardly be overemphasised. They provide the novice researcher with a step-to-step guide on how to do research of this kind. For the more seasoned researcher, the exercises serve as a checklist and an inspiration to do things differently. Second, the book provides a valuable practical introduction to doing research in the spirit of neo-positivism, realism and narrativism. In a sense, the book may also serve as an introduction to these three approaches, and how people will approach research differently using them. The author does not prefer one over the other, but points to the different kind of work involved and the kind of information elicited by the use of the three methods. In the end, the researcher must choose the approach that is best suited to his or her research purpose. Third, it is my belief that Miller's book will encourage many people to try their hand at family and life history research, using one of the three theoretical approaches presented here. The book is truly engrossing from page one onwards, and I predict that it will be a source of inspiration to students and researchers alike.

As a practical guide to in-depth qualitative interview methods in general, this book is an excellent place to start. It describes all the stages of the interview research process, with a heavy emphasis on planning and how things are carried out in practice. Moreover, a person's biography or a family history is an excellent research topic in many cases, especially for beginning researchers. Doing research on another person's life story is at the time a very open and a flexible topic, which can be adjusted to the needs and requirements of different research projects. For example, students of qualitative methodology and interviewing could use this book as a basic textbook, using one of the three methods described in it to interview one or two subjects about their life story.

Miller's book is well written, in a clear and concise language, and is therefore also easily understandable. The book is fun and entertaining to read, which is no small accomplishment considering its high academic level. There are not many writers who manage to write with humour and style at the same time that they produce a serious scholarly text. It is to Miller's credit that he has achieved this. The book can definitely be recommended to students and scholars of qualitative methods, especially as a practical guide to do actual research using qualitative research interviews.