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## Life-Histories

**Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography.** *L. L. Langness and Gelya Frank*. Novato, Calif.: Chandler and Sharp, 1981. viii + 221 pp. \$6.95 (paper).

**Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method.** *William McKinley Runyan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. xiii + 288 pp. \$19.95 (cloth).

**Carmen: The Autobiography of a Spanish Woman.** *Hans C. Buechler and Judith-Maria Buechler*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1981. xxxi + 242 pp. \$7.95 (paper).

**Son of Tecún Umán: A Maya Indian Tells His Life Story.** *James D. Sexton*, ed. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981. 250 pp. \$8.95 (paper).

**Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman.** *Marjorie Shostak*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981. 402 pp. \$20.00 (cloth).

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"As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date," Michel Foucault (1970) wrote in 1966 in *The Order of Things*. "And one perhaps nearing its end." It is ironic that just as Foucault was heralding a new, if you will, *man-less* science of man—one that gave priority to linguistics, ethnology, and psychoanalysis—there was a sudden and, at least in American anthropology, resurgent interest in precisely the figure Foucault was dismissing as a precipitate of the peculiar epistemological arrangements of 19th-century European thought. Autobiography, biography, psychobiography, the case history, the life history, and personal testimony have become something of a fashion in the social sciences, in psychology, history, and literary criticism. In American anthropology, there has been a notable increase in life histories, including Marjorie Shostak's exemplary portrait of Nisa, a !Kung woman, James D. Sexton's edition of the life story and diaries of Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán, a Tzutuhil Maya Indian from the Lake Atitlán region of Guatemala, and the Buechlers' autobiography of a Galician woman named Carmen. Several theoretical works of varying levels of sophistication have addressed themselves to the problem of the life history. Among these are Lewis L. Langness and Gelya Frank's *Lives* and, from psychology, William McKinley Runyan's *Life Histories and Psychobiography*, a sort of "evenhanded" apologetic for life historical research in psychology. Lang-

ness and Frank and Runyan do not take a sustained theoretical position. They are content to survey the field, discuss its problems, and provide extensive bibliographies.

Despite the popularity of a few anthropological life histories such as Leo Simmons's *Sun Chief* (1942) and Oscar Lewis's *Children of Sanchez* (1961), the life history has been somewhat of a conceptual—and an emotional—embarrassment to academic anthropology and has remained on the periphery of the discipline. Its reception reflects the ambiguous position of anthropology in 20th-century thought. The life history is more “literary” than “scientific”—and yet more “scientific” than “literary.” It mediates, not too successfully, the tension between the intimate field experience and the essentially impersonal process of anthropological analysis and ethnographic presentation. The commentary attached to it can be saccharine in its sentimentality and overambitious in its justification.

The life history is often a memorial to an informant-become-(distant-) friend, a commemoration of a field experience, and an expiation for abstraction and depersonalization—for ruthless departure. Langness and Frank relate it to “person-centered ethnography,” which they define, symptomatically, as

a rigorous yet compassionate effort on the part of American scholars and others to portray the lives of ordinary individuals, in cultures and contexts sometimes far removed from ones they know, with the kind of perceptiveness and detail that transform a stranger we might meet in our personal lives into a friend. [p. 1]

Something of this sentimentality is found in Shostak's *Nisa*, Sexton's *Son of Tecún Umán*, and the Buechlers' *Carmen*. Consider the conclusion to Shostak's very moving rendition of Nisa's life story: “Almost every experience I have in life is colored and enriched by the !Kung world and the way Nisa looked at it. I will always think of her, and I hope she will think of me, as a distant sister” (p. 371). Even where it is not expressed explicitly, this sentimentality and the emotions it knots together still have a certain governance over the life history.

Since the publication of Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder* in 1926, which marks for Langness and Frank the beginning of “truly rigorous work” in anthropological biography, the anthropological biography has been rationalized in many ways. Here we should probably distinguish between the eliciting of a life history as a data-collecting strategy—a strategy that is rarely rationalized in anthropology, though constantly rationalized, as Runyan shows, in psychology—and the presentation of an elicited life history. Langness and Frank give the following reasons (other than specifically psychological ones) for biographical study in anthropology:

(1) to portray a culture; (2) for literary purposes; (3) to portray aspects of culture change; (4) to illustrate some aspect of culture not usually portrayed by other means (such as women's view of their culture); (5) to communicate something not otherwise communicated (for example, the humanistic side of anthropology or, more typically, the “insider's” view of culture); or (6) to say something about deviants or other unusual cases. [p. 24]

This list reflects a conceptual disquiet that is rooted in part in the problems of representation and generalization. The life history is seen as “portraying” or “illustrating” culture or some aspect of it. To have value as such it must be truthful and come from a “typical” individual—one, at least, who can be socially located. But what does it mean to be socially located? And is there ever an individual typical of a culture? Would his—her!—life (were he, in his typicality, to recount it) be more revealing of his culture than any other life? The criteria for typicality or social location must be spelled out, and they rarely are in most life histories. Behind this notion of being typical is a peculiarly homogeneous (in my opinion, distorted) view of culture, society, and the individual. It can lead to ridiculous truisms. Take Sexton's comment on Ignacio Ujpán's place in society.

Compared to a random sample of Maya Indians interviewed, Ignacio "is both alike and different from his countrymen with regard to socioeconomic and psychological characteristics" (p. 229). Who would have expected otherwise? Sexton's observation is more revealing of his culture than of Ignacio's. I should add that Sexton's minimal description of Ignacio is not in his principal text but in his notes. Such characterizations, even in a life history, are apparently less important than cultural and social descriptions! Sexton is, of course, not alone in this assumption.

Life history anthropologists like the Buechlers say they have confirmed their informants' stories wherever possible. But what does it mean to confirm an account? To have witnessed it oneself? Even if "witnessing" were considered a valid confirmation of a verbal account (and I have my doubts), this sort of confirmation would still be impossible for most life historians. Langness and Frank argue that the long and intimate association an anthropologist has with the people he or she studies increases the "reliability" and the "validity" of the information collected.

It is difficult to sustain a web of falsehoods over a long period and anthropologists also have the advantage of often being able to match up statements and observations on the spot. When this cannot be done they can use repeated interviews with the same informant over an extended period, constantly checking and rechecking. They can also check an interview with one person against another interviewee and thus uncover inconsistencies and fabrications. Different informants often give quite different accounts of the same thing. [p. 44]

It is by no means evident that a long and intimate association with someone will increase the reliability and validity (notions that should, in any case, be analytically distinguished) of his information. Prolonged association could as easily have the opposite effect. Nor is it evident that individuals cannot sustain a web of falsehoods over time. Think of the delusion. Langness and Frank seem hoodwinked here by a naive empiricism. Does the "confirmation" of an event by another or even several other members of the informant's culture in fact confirm the event, *wie es gewesen war*, to use Ranke's by now hackneyed phrase? Or do they confirm a verbal pattern—a gloss? It would seem that consistency of accounts over time and among informants is rather more revealing of a cultural orientation or psychological disposition than of the actual occurrence of an event. Runyan, who unfortunately fails to distinguish different genres of personal history, does discuss alternate accounts and explanations. He argues for an "epistemological relativism"—a perspectivism—"that is capable of coming to terms with the diversity of accounts" (p. 34): "This stance is based upon a sense of the multiple perspectives held by human beings located at different places in the social and historical world toward objects of knowledge, and, in this case, toward other lives" (p. 34). Runyan does not sustain this existential view of history. Here, as often in his book, he concludes simplistically: "Most people would agree that, other things being equal, those accounts based on the most extensive body of evidence, best incorporating the variety of relevant perspectives, and most effectively organized and interpreted, are to be preferred" (p. 37). Fortunately, some of the anthropologist's most significant material comes precisely from multiple versions of the same event by the same informant or several different informants. Different versions may index different social positions and concomitant interests—and they may index the relationship between the ethnographer and his or her informants.

Langness and Frank discuss the role of the relationship between the informant and the anthropologist in the construction of the life history. ("Clearly the selection process, when it comes to an intensive life history, involves two parties, and both come with their own desires and needs, some of which are unconscious" [p. 44].) The life history, as I (1980) have argued (and I should note here that Langness and Frank favorably discuss my work), is the result of a complex self-constituting negotiation. It is the product (at least,

from the subject's point of view) of an arbitrary and peculiar demand from another — the anthropologist. (At some level, the anthropologist's demand is always a response to the informant.) The interplay (to make a Lacanian distinction) of demand and desire governs much of the content of the life history, and this interplay, the dynamics of the interview, must be taken into consideration in any evaluation of the material collected. Sexton, for example, lists five themes that run through Ignacio's story: family and community solidarity, poverty, drink, illness, and "sensitivity to agents of change." He does not discuss in any detail his relationship with Ignacio and does not consider his role in Ignacio's emphasis on these themes. And yet, clearly, his presence (indeed, as an "agent of change" on Ignacio) is of paramount importance to Ignacio and governs his tale. In his diary (also a response to Sexton's demand) Ignacio writes about his relationship to Sexton. He is surprised by Sexton's return and is "very content because Señor Jaime paid me well" (p. 69). Should this insistence on poverty—I don't at all mean to deny its pressing reality—be evaluated in terms of a demand on Sexton, who surely must have appeared wealthy and powerful to Ignacio? (Gift exchange plays an important role in the construction of life histories, as it does in all ethnography, but its effects are rarely discussed.) *Nisa* often asked for gifts, and Shostak gave and withheld them. Carmen was the Buechlers' maid.

More important, the anthropologist's demand may be threatening to the people with whom he or she is working. They are asked to review their life and possibly even expose themselves. They may not understand the anthropologist's demand; they may search for an "equivalent" model in their culture, one that the anthropologist searching for a life story may reject. Foucault (1978) says that since the Middle Ages we in the West have become "a singularly confessing society."

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. . . . When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body. Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied it like a shadow, and supported it when it could go no further: the dark twins. [p. 59]

As members of "singularly confessing society," we may demand something very alien to the people we study, and we, despite ourselves, "torture" them to that end. Ignacio writes about the resistance he encounters in interviewing a villager. (He is not working for Sexton at the time but for another anthropologist.) The villager says to Ignacio:

You are a thief and you can't earn any money any other way than by working with the anthropologists. I don't have anything to do with anthropologists because I am a Protestant. I understand my Bible. It says that on the outside there are sheepskins but on the inside there are voracious wolves. [pp. 83-84]

That night Ignacio has a nightmare:

I was dreaming that some huge, mean bulls were chasing me because they wanted to kill me. To get out of their path, I climbed on top of the grill of a truck, and that is when I woke up. I started thinking about the significance of my dream. Maybe the bulls represented my enemies who are thinking bad things about me for working with the anthropologists. [p. 84]

Ignacio had other nightmares that he associated with the anthropologist.

Langness and Frank recognize the unconscious as well as the conscious dimensions of the life historical interview; they note that life historians often—inevitably, I would say—intervene in the lives of their informants. They argue that life history anthropologists should be sensitive to both their and their informant's needs, motivations, and expecta-

tions. They quote David Guttman, who recommends that all field-workers in training be supervised by clinical psychologists or psychiatrists, who could highlight transference and countertransference in the interview. I am not convinced that such supervision would necessarily be psychologically beneficial or ethically rewarding to either field-worker or subject. It might well "medicalize" the interviews and provide yet another, a legitimated, cover for the interplay of demand and desire. We must not paternalize. We must not be overprotective of our informants and infantilize them.

The life history is usually constituted through a transformation—the transformation from an oral production to a written product. It becomes a text and carries with it all the ontological and epistemological burdens of the text. These burdens may differ radically from those of an oral narrative or even a written one from another tradition. The distortion that takes place in this transformation must be taken into account in both the presentation of the life history and in its interpretation. Nisa, who seems particularly comfortable, certainly eloquent, in the "genre" she and Shostak elaborated, often says upon completing an episode in her life, "the wind has taken that away." What does this say, if anything, about the status of Nisa's story? About Nisa's attitude to it? Once, when she was discussing the dissolution of one of her marriages, she paused, announced that the story had come to an end—"That's all and life went on"—and then added after a long silence; "No. There's still something in my heart about this that isn't finished. My heart is still shaking. The story hasn't come completely out. I'm going to talk more about it until it does. Then I'll go to another. Then my heart will be fine" (p. 40). Such a comment demands explication. We want to know whether or not the stories—the memory even—were considered autonomous. Was Nisa's tale a sort of exorcism? An objectification that would be carried away by the wind? A confession? (And what is a confession where there is no single authoritative god or its representative, real or fictive, who has the power to absolve, exonerate, or forgive?) Shostak, like nearly all life history anthropologists, fails to address these questions. They would require the philosophical and linguistic sensitivity of a Calame-Griaule (1965).

But even at a less philosophical level, we should like to know how (if at all) the life history interdigitates with other story forms in the subject's culture and how (if at all) the subject makes use of them in negotiations with the anthropologist. We should also like to know something about indigenous notions of authorship, rhetoric, style, and narrative techniques—figurative language, imagery, allegory, double entendre, humor, irony, "beginnings and endings," conventional silences, suspense, and denouement. Without these, as any literary critic knows, no adequate interpretation (at any level including the cultural and the psychological) can be made. Ignacio Ujpán's life story seems constrained, lifeless even, by contrast to his diaries. Is this the result of Sexton's editing? Of the face-to-face contact in the life history interview? Of the presence or absence of indigenous story models? We have no way of knowing. The Buechlers attempt, superficially at least, to situate Carmen's story in the Galician literary tradition, noting that the life history is not alien to it, and in her own family tradition, in which storytelling was important.

The anthropologist's transformation of the informant's life story into a life historical text is determined in good part by the literary conventions at his or her disposal. *Nisa*, *Carmen*, and *Son of Tecún Umán* have all been edited. They pretend to a "literariness" that precludes serious analysis of the informant's initial production, but not of the text when it is recognized for what it is: the product of an encounter between the ethnographer and his or her informant (and between the ethnographer and his or her readers). Shostak, who describes in detail her encounter with Nisa, does not include her own interventions in "Nisa's text." Nisa, who relishes talking about sex, marriage, and affairs

("Having affairs is one of the things God gave us."), explains at one point that a woman who has not been sexually satisfied may become sick. She talks about masturbation and then adds, "Women don't take men's genitals into their mouths nor do men kiss women's genitals. Men only kiss women's mouths. Because a woman's genitals could burn a man's mouth. So he just kisses her mouth and when he gets hard he lies with her" (p. 287). Is this association Nisa's or the result of Shostak's questions—her associations?

Most anthropological life histories read as though the narrator is addressing the cosmos. Although Shostak fails to describe her specific exchanges with Nisa, she does in general convey her relationship beautifully. Nisa's talk of sex, marriage, and affairs has to be understood not only in terms of an old woman reviewing her life with nostalgia—a !Kung version of a Colette, willing to take on memory and the pain of memory—but also of an older woman giving instruction to a younger one. Sexton and the Buechlers include at least some of their questions, but they are not as successful as Shostak in conveying their relationship with their informants. Both are (*in nomine scientiae?*) quite passionless. Fortunately, Ignacio and Carmen, like Nisa, are not constrained by a puritanical science tending to preclude from its purview those emotions that most deeply affect its practitioners and those they study.

Langness and Frank note that the analysis of life histories is the least developed aspect of anthropological biography. In their review, they discuss such works as Aberle's (1951) "psychosocial analysis" of *Sun Chief*, the Leightons' (1949) "psychobiological personality study" of a Navaho hand-trembler, and Mandelbaum's (1973) work on Gandhi, but they themselves offer no systematic approach to the life history. They do discuss in some detail the social ordering of personal experience, the marking of transitions, notions of the self, and the significance of death in the articulation of a life. Runyan's review of analytic approaches in psychology—Allport, Bromley, R. W. White, de Waele—may be of some interest to the anthropologist. He offers no systematic approach either. Instead, he distinguishes three "levels of generality" in the study of lives: (1) what is true of all human beings, (2) what is true of groups of human beings (race, class, sex, historical cohort), and (3) what is true of individual human beings.

There is order or regularity within each of these three levels of analysis, and the three levels cannot be collapsed into each other. The three levels of inquiry are semi-independent, and the solution of problems at one level does not necessarily solve problems at other levels. [p. 169]

Runyan does not elaborate the relationship between these levels. He argues for a "life course" orientation, which takes into account behavior-determining, person-determining, and situation-determining processes, and he develops a probabilistic "stage-state" model for describing, if not predicting, life courses. Here, as elsewhere in his book, Runyan mars his argument by his failure to consider adequately the genesis and status of personal historical material. Observed sequences of behavior have to be distinguished from narrative ones. Causation—in the latter, at least—may be an artifact of the narrative itself.

Like most life history anthropologists, Shostak, Sexton, and to a lesser extent, the Buechlers offer little by way of analysis, but they do give considerable ethnographic background that serves to situate the informants in their culture. This "ethnographic background" is the anthropologist's construct, and the individual, implicitly, at any rate, is "contained" in it—in "his culture." The individual is its victim or the victim of its (social and economic) determinants. (The Buechlers are most explicit in considering the way in which world economic and political arrangements impinge on their informant's life.) Poverty and alienation are dominant themes in all three life histories. The Buechlers argue that the processual nature of the life history is "especially suited to the formulation of dynamic models of social relations and to the testing of theories of social change. . . .

By illuminating the individuals' options as well as the constraints on actions, social change becomes the end process of creative new strategies rather than the product of nameless forces" (p. vi).

We must ask whether or not the life history is in fact the best or even a possible strategy for illuminating an individual's options. Indeed, given its retrospective nature, are we analyzing "real" options—the options at the time—or selected options that justify choices already made? We have to ask, too, whether or not the life history is suited to the formulation of dynamic models of social change. I believe a case can be made for formulating such models from the dynamics of the interview in which the life story is, so to speak, invented, but not from the life historical text. The text provides us with a conventionalized gloss on a social reality that, from a strict epistemological point of view, we cannot know. We may be discussing the dynamics of narration rather than the dynamics of society.

Victor Barnouw remarked once that the main difficulty with life histories, fascinating as they are, is knowing what to do with them. Judging from the works under review, the difficulty is still with us today. In part, this difficulty arises from our failure to consider adequately both the genesis of the material out of which the life history is constructed and the status of the constructed material: the life historical text. When we analyze a life history, we are analyzing a text, not social reality, and this text is itself the product of a complex collaboration. "It is of the utmost importance to be aware of this collaboration," Langness and Frank say,

and to carefully consider the categories, forms, stages, hypotheses, and theories that emerge in the life history process. Self-consciousness is as vital as consciousness of the other. Only insofar as you can understand all of the steps in your analysis and communicate them to others can you be said to have completed a useful or meaningful life history. [p. 86]

I am skeptical, I must admit, because I see a real limit to our lucidity—total lucidity, the omniscient narrator, is a literary construct—and to our communicative capacity. A discipline that lays claim to science still has to recognize its own inherent limitations. To recognize such limits is not to have to remain silent, as Valéry's Monsieur Teste does, but to operate inventively within them.

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## Reason and Culture: The Universal and the Particular Revisited

**Rationality and Relativism.** *Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes*, eds. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982. viii + 312 pp. \$12.50 (paper).

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Certain issues in cultural anthropology are fundamental and perennial. The nature and scope of reason, its universality and relativity, is one of them. This becomes even more evident if we include directly related problems: questions of cross-cultural translation, ethnographic interpretation, and ethnological explanation. These are also the central issues raised in *Rationality and Relativism*. Before reviewing their theoretical significance and the different options taken by the contributors to this stimulating volume, let me try to place the issues in a historical perspective.

The editor's informative introduction takes us a long way in this regard, though not far enough, in my estimation. After distinguishing between three related issues—moral, perceptual, and conceptual relativism—the editors announce the central focus of their book: conceptual relativism or, conversely, the truth of reason. They locate the question of rationality on several historical levels. Most broadly, as an issue that has preoccupied us since the Enlightenment and the Romantic reaction. The editors might, however, have gone further. The preoccupation with rationality actually dates from our disenchantment with myth as an explanatory model. We would thus have to go back as far as Plato. He first defined the nature of academic knowledge and abstract rationality—a definition wrought with anthropological implications (see Diamond 1974).

The volume's constant reference to rationality in terms of science also demands a reference to the twin philosophers who indirectly inspire most of the contributors to the book (for it is lopsided in favor of rationalism): René Descartes and Roger Bacon. They are not discussed anywhere in the book (though both are mentioned incidently). Instead, the editors favor a narrower historical framework. Even Marx, Weber, and Durkheim are passed over in favor of contemporary developments. One could argue, of course, that space is limited. But the omission has significant consequences. These absentee "fathers" of the social sciences (like Vico before them and explicitly in reaction to Descartes) *agonized* over the possibilities and limitations of reason, rationality, rationalization, and so on—especially in relation to scientific and technological values and their sociological embodiment and normative implications. This critical dimension is lacking, not only in the introduction, but in the book as a whole. To put it another way, the contributors to *Ra-*