



Qualitative Sociology Review – Book Reviews

Volume V, Issue 2 – August 2009

<https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.5.2.07>

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Book Review:

Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History by Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbara Laslett. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 2008

The book “Telling Stories. The Use of Personal Narratives in The Social Sciences and History” is written by three scholars representing disciplines of social science and history. As the Authors stress, they belong to three generations what differentiates their political experiences, values and intellectual priorities (p. viii). These diverse perspectives are to be a specific input to the one project based on a few shared assumptions. Firstly, all three Authors have used personal narratives as empirical sources for their studies and therefore they want to propagate this perspective as well as share with their research and theoretical experiences. Secondly, the Authors aim to present interdisciplinary approach, which appears to be a very fruitful project in face of contemporary, very blurry limits of disciplines in social science, especially when one uses qualitative approach. Finally, all three Authors have been interested in problems of gender and feminism, therefore they very often address to the projects exploring this field and thanks to it a reader may learn about many researches concentrated on this problem.

The book consists of an Introduction and five extended chapters in which the Authors characterize specific features of personal narratives in terms of their social/sociological meaning, theoretical perspectives supporting using narrative approach as the means enabling to show subjectivity of a social actor, interrelation between an individual, his or her story and historical context. The Authors also enumerate and characterize different forms of telling and retelling/reproducing life stories, they pay attention to the social context of evoking the situation of story telling what makes it an intersubjective encounter. Finally, they share with methodological and epistemological remarks related to the problem of theorizing on the basis of personal narratives, namely to what extent and how a researcher is entitled to form generalization when using narratives.

As a scholar who also uses biographical narratives in social research I may say that the Authors touch all the most important problems and dilemmas connected with the process of collecting the material, its analysis and founding theoretical background for theorizing about social reality when using this kind of material. Thus, when reading the book I had a feeling of authentic involvement in the discussed problems and their real relationship to the Authors’ interests and experiences. We may then pose the question to whom the book can be addressed? And in my opinion it is not an easy task to answer. Perhaps it is a good reading for “beginners”- that is those who need to be encouraged to use personal narratives. In such case they will find in the book many examples of researches done this way and representing

different fields of social science. Therefore, the book is a very good source for knowing many American as well as European works belonging both to classic output (like Thomas and Znaniecki) and contemporary projects. By saying “a very good source” I do not mean the sufficient one. The Authors use examples to illustrate their points but for sure the bibliography of the book cannot be treated as an overview of even main works based on narrative biography analysis. Again, if personal narratives researches are to be introduced to “the beginners”, they must be conscious that they do not find in the book any systematic lecture on the above mentioned problems. These are rather some hints or glosses not really related to what we call a “main stream” of analytical and theoretical approaches of this field. For example, the Authors do not mention main representatives of English oral history approach, German works or even well known American authors involved in the process of propagating as well as theorizing on storytelling analysis. Just to mention two names of Anselm Strauss or Norman Denzin. Therefore, I would recommend the book as a form of inspiration, but I cannot advise it as the source of basic knowledge about the use of personal narratives. At the same time this disadvantage becomes an advantage when addressing the book to scholars experienced in this area as the publication is a good source to learn what is going on in some extracted fields of storytelling analysis, especially in American environment, particularly related to gender studies.

When reading the book I have come to a general conclusion that also very often appears when I take part in many, especially international, conferences -although there are networks devoted to biographical approach where researchers using this kind of method meet and exchange their experiences, it is very difficult to establish a common methodological and theoretical background known to scholars and then eventually discussed. Whereas it seems to happen so in other social sciences sub-disciplines when scholars share common knowledge about certain theories or approaches, where, in other words, exists something that we can call a “canon knowledge”. In case of narratives this knowledge seems to be often “nationalized” by local projects. As the result, something what is treated as a sort of “common truth” by some researchers is not defined by the others in terms of “the known truth”. Just to give one example. In the last chapter the Authors discuss the problem of generalizing and categorizing based on personal narratives resources and they do not mention the assumptions of grounded theory that has achieved “grounded” position in qualitative approach and it gives answers to problems that the Authors analyze on their own without referring to rich reflection on the topic. Therefore, when reading the book, I have got an impression that lots of presented problems and dilemmas have already been discussed. Of course it is very fruitful and inspiring, that the Authors work by themselves on these problems and try to find explanation based on their theoretical and empirical experience. What bothers me is that they do not place their reflections in the wider context of well developed discourse in the field of biographical/storytelling research in social science.

Citation

Kaźmierska, Kaja (2009) “Book Review: Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History.” *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. V Issue 2. Retrieved Month, Year
(http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)