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Making a Life in Yorkville

*Experience and Meaning in the
Life-Course Narrative of an Urban
Working-Class Man*

Gerald Handel

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To the memory of
Fred Davis

and to the memory of
Harry M. Rosen

and to
Yola Lev
Ira O. Glick

Carol and Lee Rainwater

Their talents for friendship have warmed my life.

Usual social-science concepts of the life cycle focus upon the flow of persons through time. But a mature human consciousness is also a compound resultant of the flow of time through persons.

David W. Plath (1980, p.13)

It is important that the standardized life course as we discuss it is an institutional system, a set of rules and preferences of a formalized but highly abstract kind. There is a great deal of slippage when it becomes translated into the actual experience of individuals, whose real life courses have more anomalies and unpredictabilities than the official system.

John W. Meyer (1986, p. 203)

Rather than looking at social and cultural systems solely as they impinge on a life, shape it, and turn it into an object, a life history should allow one to see how an actor makes culturally meaningful history, how history is produced in action and in the actor's retrospective reflections on that action. A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account.

Ruth Behar (1990, p. 225)

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Preface

This study of the life of a working-class man is intended as a contribution to understanding how human lives proceed. It falls within a domain known by the overlapping terms 'life course' and 'human development.' It uses a method known as 'life history.' It offers some new concepts in its domain and a new procedure for employing the method. The audience to which it is addressed includes scholars and students in all fields that are concerned with the life course and life-span development: sociology, psychology, human development, anthropology, social work, oral history, education, gerontology, counseling; it is also addressed to those who have a particular interest in the methodology of life history, narrative, and case study.

This study also throws new light on what kinds of events and experiences enter into a life lived in the urban working class. The life history of Tony Santangelo, a 47-year-old construction worker, offers, I believe, one of the fullest and most rounded accounts of a working-class man's life to be found in the literature. Inasmuch as Yorkville, one of New York's most historic neighborhoods in the Borough of Manhattan, is gradually disappearing as it becomes part of the gentrified Upper East Side, this study of one of its residents also makes a modest contribution to urban history, since it portrays the neighborhood and a community's way of life through his eyes.

The study of the life course through the study of a life history is not an entirely novel approach but it is not very widely used. Life-course studies more commonly are conducted with large data sets, so it is necessary to make clear what the approach taken here can contribute that is not attainable through large data sets. The present study is distinctive in these respects:

(1) It amplifies the concept of life course. As ordinarily studied, the life course is defined as a sequence of life transitions that have an essentially public character, transitions such as leaving school, getting a first job, getting married. Such events are, of course, also included in life histories, but many different aspects of a life—non-public events, self evaluations, dilem-

mas, moral judgments, triumphs and defeats—are included as well. What this volume offers is an account of a man's life course as he has experienced it and is able to tell of his experience. Whereas conventional studies most often deal with *the expectable life course*, this one deals with *the experienced life course*.

(2) Whereas studies of the expectable life course focus on factors that influence the timing and duration of statuses, this study is focused on how meanings are constructed in a person's life. It views the life course not as prescribed pathway or as statistical probability but as a personally and interpersonally constructed array of meanings within a social world that offers choice as well as imposing constraint.

(3) It offers the distinctive advantages of a case study, a methodology whose current value is signalled by several recent books devoted to it. Social scientists who regard generalization as the only goal of research challenge case study with the question: "How can you generalize from a single case?" By restrictively defining knowledge as valid generalization of empirical findings, those who ask this question as a dismissal of case study choose to avoid reciprocal questions: "What kinds of knowledge are lost in the establishment of generalizations? What important things can we learn that cannot be learned through the procedures that must be followed for arriving at empirical generalizations but are knowable through other procedures?" Knowledge grows by specification as well as by generalization. What a case study shows us that cannot be shown in large data sets are the specifics of action, the construction of reality through interpretation and communication. In large data sets, lives are aggregated; such an aggregation is, for some purposes, a meaningful unit, but it is not the only meaningful unit. An individual life is also a meaningful unit, as the large extant literatures of biography, autobiography, and life history attest.

(4) Finally, a case study permits a certain kind of generalization—not empirical generalization to other cases but the genesis of meaningful concepts, theories, and questions that have general applicability beyond the case. By close scrutiny of a case and its workings we can be prompted to think of questions that are significant for a range of cases and to produce concepts that can be useful for general understanding beyond the case that prompted their creation. That is what I have tried to do here. I offer a new way of thinking about the life course and a number of new concepts, as well as a more systematic use of some existing concepts than has been customary. Some years ago a younger colleague who, like I, was gathering some life histories because of their tantalizing promise of illumination, asked me "What do you do with life histories?" I did not then have a good answer, but I believe that I have, in this work, now provided a good answer, one that I hope others will find useful. Needless to say, no answer is ever the only answer. Just as my reading of and thinking about the work of others has led

me to see openings to new concepts and procedural improvements, I hope that readers of this work will be able to derive similar benefits.

This study is in three parts, preceded by a prologue that states my general orientation to the life course. Part I sets the conceptual and contextual framework of the study. Part II, after a brief introduction, consists of the verbatim, unedited life history recounted to the author by Tony Santangelo. Since the interviewee was promised anonymity, the name is a pseudonym, as are the names of family members and other key persons in his life. No other details of the recounted life history have been changed in any way.

Part III is my analysis of Tony Santangelo's life history. It seeks to understand the important aspects of his life that he has recounted. A great many life histories are being gathered these days by social scientists and historians. Many of them are not interpreted at all but are presented as documents simply demonstrating or exemplifying a social condition. Some do receive interpretation, primarily as exemplars of a culture. A few receive the kind of analysis offered here: that is, an analysis that conceives of the person not simply as an exemplar of a culture or of a social condition but as a person making choices within a social and cultural domain, a person faced with the task of having to construct a life within a society whose guidelines are sometimes insistent but often suggestive rather than precisely prescriptive and flexible rather than rigid. The analysis has the double aim of understanding one man's life and providing a new conceptualization and procedure for understanding other lives as well.

Just as a life is part of a community and society, so, too, is an analysis part of a community of discourse. Although this work is innovative in several respects, it is not idiosyncratic but enters into dialogue with historical and contemporary works bearing on issues of life course, life-span development, narrative, life history, self, social class, and gender. While it is not my purpose to present extended discussions of these literatures or of all the issues they raise, the contextual analysis of Part I, the Introduction to Part II, and the analysis of Tony Santangelo's life course in Part III each engage with significant statements from those literatures. These selections serve both as links to the discourse community and as benchmarks for the analysis. But they are *selections*, which help to place the analysis in a larger context. They are not, and are not intended to be, extended discussions of the issues embedded in the larger literatures.

NOTE

Because this is a book about a man, for stylistic consistency I use masculine nouns and pronouns in general statements, although most of them would be equally applicable to women.

Acknowledgments

My first debt for this volume is to Charles I. Katze, formerly Executive Director of the Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center in Yorkville, who generously supported my effort to gather life histories from working-class men and introduced me to Tony Santangelo. I was the beneficiary of Tony's trust in and respect for Chuck. Tony agreed to be interviewed, as did several other men, because Chuck vouched for me. I am grateful for his support, which also included providing me a private room in the Center for the interviews.

I am indebted to Tony Santangelo (pseudonym) for agreeing to share his life history with me and to answer my questions. He was comfortable in the interview situation, as was I. We were on a first-name basis. My sense is that he enjoyed his participation, and when I presented him with a copy of the transcript in a hard-cover binder he communicated pleasant surprise at the volume of his accomplishment.

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University. I express my appreciation to Mrs. Elizabeth Mason, formerly Associate Director of that office, for agreeing to take responsibility for the transcription and selecting one of her transcribers to do the work. That transcript forms the bulk of Part II of this volume. One colleague who read the transcript commented to me that it seems more fluent than the transcripts he has seen in the work of that group of sociologists known as conversation analysts; he thought I had edited it to increase the fluency. I have not edited it in any way except to provide pseudonyms for actual names; to delete a few words that the transcriber had crossed out and replaced with what s/he considered more accurate renditions (which were usually slight variants on the crossed-out words); to provide a blank line in place of two or three uniquely identifying facts about persons other than Tony; and to insert "(inaudible)" in the two or three blank spaces where a word is missing. In my judgment, these measures have no significance philosophically, methodologically, or theoretically, except that they

protect the privacy of Tony and others whom he mentions. In all other respects, the transcript is identical to that produced by the transcriber. While Tony was fairly articulate, his narration was also characterized by grammatical errors, hesitations and self-interruptions, and some syntactical awkwardness. These have all been retained in the text. The text before the reader is the same text that I worked with, unaltered in wording or sequence.

Several friends and colleagues offered particularly helpful comments on the manuscript and substantial encouragement at critical junctures. For this support I thank Spencer Cahill, Ronald Farrell, Viktor Gecas, Norman Goodman, Joseph Gusfield, Barbara Levy Simon, and Kate Wittenberg. It was Barbara Levy Simon's suggestion that I introduce the life course narrative in Part II with some pointed questions, rather than simply having Part II consist only of the narrative, as I originally intended. Although I was initially skeptical, when I set to work formulating the questions I realized that her suggestion was most valuable. I want also to express my thanks to Richard Alba, Robert Alford, and Lindsey Churchill for their generosity in taking the time to read the manuscript and offering me their views. Although their views differ from mine in important ways, their comments were helpful.

My wife, Ruth, far more skilled than I in computer use, has given me much guidance and assistance in dealing with its mysteries. I am most appreciative of her substantial help and steadfast moral support.

I thank Ellen Smiley, director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at CCNY for making available the Center's scanner and the services of her staff members, Bill Jeanniton and Jason Von Zerneck. I worked most closely with Bill, who was enormously helpful in assisting me to scan the life history interviews into the computer, and Jason was promptly and generously helpful when Bill was not available. They have my respect and my thanks.

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Prologue: Making a Life

Every man depends upon his society for a meaningful life, any kind of life. Every child is born somewhere, a socially defined place, and every child who survives is born into the care of someone. Every child is born into some memberships—into a family or foster care, a community, a nation, perhaps into a religion, an ethnic group, a grouping of kin, a network of relationships which operate in established ways. And so a child starts out in life unable to function in society, yet located in it by the fact that the groupings into which he is born have their place. Their place is his place, their rules the rules he must learn, and their routines the ones he must acquire. In the course of his life he moves on to other groupings in other settings. In their midst—earlier and later—he finds the tasks that will occupy him, the interests that will engage him, the standards by which he will judge himself and others. As a person moves through his life course, his sense of who he is and what he is about takes shape in relation to others whose lives and activities are organized into groups and institutions that serve to focus purposes, emotions, activities, and plans—from day to day, month to month, year to year. He becomes closely involved in some groups and institutions, peripherally involved in others, and aware of still others from a distance. Throughout his life, a person finds membership and seeks satisfying involvement with different kinds of groups and institutions—family, friendships, work groups, recreation groups, impersonal associations organized for various purposes.

Every man's life is subject to probabilities that certain kinds of experiences and outcomes are more likely than others, but men sometimes perceive and struggle with the probabilities bearing in on them, and they reach for a different fate. A man's life chances are influenced by the station to which he is born, but people are not simply passive exemplars of their birth station. Further, in a large-scale urban society, culture is not a script but a range of variously valued options and an array of expectations of different degrees of demandingness. A particular subculture may have many or few

prescriptions and proscriptions, but these do not construct themselves into actions. Their relevance to a situation must be interpreted by a human agent. Every person develops consciousness and must come to his own changing understanding of the constraints that limit him, the social supports that may sustain him, the possibilities open to him, the choices that he can make. Whatever the combination of skill and blunder with which he makes his way, he cannot be totally inert or oblivious in his circumstance, even if he does not always understand it. The world is defined and redefined for him by multiple significant others who look at the world from their own incompletely overlapping understandings and who exert their uneven influences upon him. He must make his own adaptations to situations that are visited upon him or to situations he selects to enter. Every man must make his own life.

Every man must remember his life in order to continue living as the person he believes himself to be. No one can remember all that he has lived through. It is, indeed, necessary to forget much, but to forget all is to lose the capacity to continue social participation except as an institutionalized patient or equivalent. The social scientist can deal with memory in terms of its limitations or in terms of its necessity as a foundation of personal and social existence. The limitations of memory may lead some researchers to try to avoid any reliance upon the memories of those they study. What we remember is indeed incomplete, influenced by “an interplay of appetites, instincts, interests and ideals peculiar to any given subject,” as Bartlett (1932) pointed out long ago, and subject to repression, as Freud (1948 [1915]) pointed out even earlier. Yet, we also confront the phenomenon that people not only must remember a great deal about their lives in order to function but that they have the capacity to assemble their memories in a recounting that they recognize and claim as the story of their life. There are undoubtedly contexts in which life history recounters deliberately lie, but there are also contexts in which recounters strive earnestly for veridicality. Although we need to be attentive to the vagaries of memory, we ought also to heed a conclusion by Daniel Schacter, one of the leading contemporary researchers of memory who states that “we must keep in mind that errors and distortions in remembering, though startling when they occur, are far from the norm in our mnemonic lives. Most of the time our memories reliably handle the staggering variety of demands that our day-to-day activities place on them” (Schacter 1996, pp. 132–133). Long-term memory adds complications, but let us not forget that the capacity to remember and tell one’s life history forms the basis of the art of autobiography and has been the foundation of the life history method in social science since the work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1918–1920). Remembering and telling one’s life history is a fundamental human accomplishment.

PART I

The Multiple Contexts of an Experienced Life Course

THE LIFE

THE COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Yorkville, now slowly dissolving into the gentrifying Upper East Side of Manhattan, was long known as one of New York City's more distinctive neighborhoods, occasionally reaching into public consciousness almost as vividly as Harlem, Greenwich Village, and the Lower East Side. It was known for its multi-ethnic population of European descent—Germans, Irish, Czechs, Italians, Hungarians, Austrians—all of whom maintained a variety of cultural institutions and commercial establishments. It gained brief national notoriety during the 1930s when the German-American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization, conducted parades through the neighborhood in support of Germany's dictator, Adolf Hitler, and his totalitarian state, the Third Reich—parades that generated tumultuous counterdemonstrations. More benign, Yorkville was the birthplace of Lou Gehrig, legendary first baseman of the New York Yankees in their glory days, as well as the locale of the Ruppert Brewery whose owner, Jacob Ruppert, was then also the owner of the Yankees.

The population of the district was largely working-class, some very poor, although streets on the perimeter of the neighborhood housed more well-to-do people. Housing for a large share of the population was cold-water flats in four- and five-story tenements. Many of the tenements, still occupied by working-class people, remain, particularly on the side streets. But along the avenues many have been torn down and replaced by high-rise apartment buildings for young upwardly mobile professionals—"yuppies" as they came to be known in the 1980s. If stories in *The New York Times* are any indication, Yorkville's fading color is newsworthy. Over a double-column story with two pictures, a headline of December 21, 1980 reads, "Change Comes as a Loss to Yorkville Old-Timers" (*New York Times*

1980). The story records the closing of Joe Wagner's, a restaurant and bar that was a favorite working-class meeting place—and was frequented by Tony Santangelo and his friends. One of the pictures shows the owner, his wife, and a cook. The other shows a new 29-story high-rise towering over a 5-story tenement next to it. A 1984 headline reports "The Fall of a Yorkville Landmark: Ethnic Makes Way for Modern" (Kennedy 1984), while one of 1991 records "Durable Landmark to Irish Glory Fading Out on the East Side" (*New York Times* 1991). These and other specific stories over recent years can be partially summed up by the headline of November 6, 1983: "Yorkville Turns Chic and Costly" (Rimer 1983). The newspaper continued to chronicle the transformation in occasional stories over the years. One 1985 story quotes a 45-year resident, a retired foodservice worker, now age 75, who lives with his wife on Social Security payments of \$400 a month, while adjacent paragraphs refer to studio and one-bedroom apartments in renovated buildings renting for \$1,000 a month and one-bedroom condominiums selling for \$200,000 in new buildings (Johnson 1985). In 1990 a story about new condominiums and "upscale shops" was headlined "A New Cachet for Old East 86th Street" (Kennedy 1990).

Tony Santangelo's Yorkville

What was it like to grow up in Yorkville? How did Tony Santangelo experience its distinctiveness? Born and bred in Yorkville, having spent most of his life there, and still living there in 1974 when he told his life history at the age of 47, Tony had a firm identity as a Yorkville resident. What did Yorkville mean to him?

In telling his life story, Tony Santangelo reveals the local social structure as he participated in it. He identifies himself as a child of Italian-American parents. However, as he recounts his life, his ethnic identity did not loom large in his social participation. Far more central was being Catholic and the stability of his membership in the same parish. His christening, communion, and confirmation all took place at Our Lady of Good Counsel parish church, in which his parents had been married. Tony went to the parish elementary school and graduated from it. (He went to a public high school.) He was married in that church and his children were christened in it. In his late teens and early twenties he played baseball on the team of neighboring St. Ignatius parish, whose membership was much wealthier than his native parish and included some of the celebrity Catholic families of New York and the nation. Through this athletic participation out of his local neighborhood he gained an awareness of social class differences. Because of his ability as a player, he was invited to delimited participation in a world of privilege. He speaks with wonder and even awe as he recollects the St. Ignatius team's being provided with top-quality equipment and, for the first time in his life, playing baseball in a proper baseball uniform. While he did

not long sustain off-the-field friendships with his St. Ignatius teammates, he was part of a successful team, one that did well enough in its Catholic Youth Organization league to travel to the CYO national championships in Michigan. This was an early highlight in his life, even though the team suffered losses in its first two games and quickly returned to New York.

Tony never gives any inkling of ever hoping to become rich and move into an adult world like that of St. Ignatius parish. But he is unambiguous and emphatic in his determination to avoid sinking from his poor working-class status to what he regards as the bottom of society, the status of criminal law-breaker. He talks about the guys in his neighborhood who engaged in crime and who tried to get him to join in with them. Although he acknowledges pilfering apples and potatoes from grocers, he makes a clear distinction between that and more serious crime; he also makes it clear that he never stepped over what he sees as a clear dividing line. Indeed, he delineates the choice he saw between being involved in crime or being involved in sports, and he determined to follow his love of baseball, which gave him not only intrinsic rewards but an effective way to stay out of trouble. Sports became an important anchorage for his life, not only in adolescence and young adulthood but in adulthood, when he was asked by a priest he was friendly with to coach baseball and hockey teams in the parish. The priest's request effected a transformation of Tony's identity, because not until then did Tony think of himself as someone who had something to teach. Tony's involvement with baseball dramatizes what may be taken as *twin principles of the life course: Every life is a social construction, and every life is a personal construction. Neither principle is reducible to the other, and neither is sufficient by itself.* Tony's family and his parish gave him membership in the social world. These social units delineated behavior standards, held out goals and opportunities, offered guidance toward respected and worthwhile activity. The life of the neighborhood and the street also offered choices, and Tony is explicit about choices that he made.

Parishes were thus significant units of social meaning in Tony's life. St. Ignatius parish was both his introductory instruction about a world of wealth beyond what he knew in his home parish and his personal anchorage as an athlete whose accomplishments were recognized beyond his immediate circle. One of the most poignant expressions in Tony's account of his life is his statement, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I just became, just like a neighborhood somebody." He was good enough to receive try-outs with three major league baseball teams, but none materialized into a chance at a career.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Every person's life occurs in historical time and is shaped by the events, social structure, and culture of that time, even as the person engages with

immediate others in constructing that life. Tony Santangelo was born in 1927, during the post-World War I “normalcy” of the 1920s, as proclaimed by President Harding and continued by his Republican successors, presidents Coolidge and Hoover. His childhood years were mostly lived during the Great Depression that began in 1929 and that continued even during the emergency relief and social welfare reform efforts of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, until the country’s economic situation changed around 1940 when production increased in anticipation of possible war. His adolescence was passed during World War II. When the war ended in 1945 he entered the army and participated in the occupation of Japan. Three years after he completed his army service, the Korean War broke out and lasted for three years. When Tony was interviewed, the Vietnam War had concluded a year or so earlier. In addition to these several wars and the Great Depression, other historically significant periods during his life were “the McCarthy era,” the several years in the early 1950s when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin conducted relentless and out-of-control searches for Communist subversives; the “Great Society” (1963–1968) of President Lyndon Johnson, which overlapped the Vietnam War; and a long period of political instability beginning with the assassination of President John Kennedy in November 1963 and followed by the open turmoil of the Civil Rights movement, the protests against the Vietnam War, the assassinations of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King and presidential candidate Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and the political scandal known as “Watergate,” which resulted in the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974, a few months after Tony was interviewed.

Since a major part of Tony Santangelo’s formation of consciousness took place during the Great Depression, it is a plausible supposition that the economic deprivations and hardships sustained by so many people during that time would have had a significant impact on his life. We are cautioned against applying it uncritically by Glen Elder’s study (1974) of children of this period, which found that the impact of the Great Depression depended on the age of the child when it hit and on how much economic hardship the child’s family suffered. Tony reports that his family always had enough to eat. His father seems to have been steadily employed as a bartender in his brother’s restaurant, and Tony recalls with some vividness the way in which his father practiced his occupation. But Tony also refers to a sense of not enough money available, which he attributes to his father’s spending on drink, not to the Depression. His most acute expression of economic deprivation comes in his exclamation that he did not live in an apartment with steam heat until 1959. He communicates a sense of humiliation that his housing was in this respect so far below a contemporary standard. This was a prevalent tenement condition that pre-existed the Depression and continued for him long after it but that does not appear to have been in any way a direct consequence of it.

Of all the defining political and economic events of his lifetime until age forty-seven, the only two that Tony Santangelo treats as personally significant are the United States participation in World War II and the United States Army's occupation of Japan after the Japanese defeat in that war. His older brother was drafted into the army when Tony was thirteen and was still overseas when Tony went into the army at age eighteen in 1945. His brother's absence during those five teenage years did not diminish Tony's idolization of his brother, but it did deprive him of the day-to-day living example that his brother might have provided. The possible significance of that deprivation can be judged by considering Tony's characterization of his brother in the context of his own life course. The occupation of Japan was a political event in which he personally participated. It is the only substantial period of his life when he was away from Yorkville, and he sees it as having enlarged his life.

The historical context of a life is constructed not only of political and economic events and trends but of cultural ones as well. The creation of the movies expanded the opportunities for children, as well as adults, to "go out," as historian David Nasaw has documented in his book, *Going Out* (Nasaw 1994). In Tony's case movie going played a significant part in constructing his relationship with his mother. Baseball, in those days celebrated as "the national pastime," was another significant cultural focus; it provided Tony with his early aspiration, with meaning in his father's eyes, and with an important adult identity. Finally, at mid-life when he produced his life history, attachment to urban neighborhood was still a value, although it was being eroded by real estate forces that were slowly encroaching on a long-settled neighborhood. Although as a young man he moved for a brief period to the Bronx, he soon moved back to Yorkville and was living at mid-life in the same urban neighborhood in which he was born and had grown up.

Every life course is a product of its time in history, but it cannot be understood only in historical terms. The limits of an historical approach are acknowledged by Glen Elder, who, with the publication of his 1974 study of Depression-era children, became one of the leading scholars of historical influence on the life course. In a methodological work devoted to working with archival data, Elder, Eliza Pavalko, and Elizabeth S. Clipp (1993, p. 67) state, "[E]ven when historical influence is substantively important it may be operationalized as a period or cohort effect that provides no precise information as to the nature of the influence. We know that members of a particular cohort are not uniformly exposed to the historical record and that experiential variations within specific cohorts are substantial." It is therefore necessary, as I believe this statement implies, to focus on ways of gaining access to and understanding the experienced life course, which is the goal of the present work. The next two sections take us some steps closer to that goal, while Parts II and III present its attainment.

THE LIFE HISTORY

THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT

Every life history is a social product because it is produced in a language that belongs to a society and because it is produced for an audience (even if the audience is restricted to the socialized person who produced it). But the circumstances in which life histories are produced are quite various, and the variations are of several kinds. Denzin (1989) reviews the variety of ways in which lives are told and subsumes them all into a general concept of method which he calls 'the interpretive biographical method.' He makes various distinctions within it, but I want to emphasize one distinction more sharply than he does.

A fundamental distinction that is important for present purposes is between a life history that is written over a long period of time by a person who initiates the project of telling his own life and a life history that is produced in interviews in response to someone else's initiative. These two procedures arise from different traditions, and they yield two different kinds of products that—despite some occasional blurring of terminology—go by different names. The written document is regularly referred to as an autobiography, and it is a crafted product written to produce certain impressions or effects that can be carefully controlled by the writer. Writers of autobiographies are usually prominent persons whose eminent (or notorious) social standing establishes a claim on public attention.¹ That claim is not restricted to the documentary dimension of autobiography. As Georges Gusdorf writes:

The significance of autobiography should . . . be sought beyond truth and falsity, as those are conceived by simple common sense. It is unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. (Gusdorf 1980, p. 43)

In contrast, many, if not most, scholars who obtain life histories through an interviewing procedure are not primarily interested in them as art but for what they reveal about the life and how it is lived. The cooperative recounter of a life history is less likely to be intent on constructing a focused and unified picture of his life and certainly less likely to be able to do so on the spot. Although impression management may be a constitutive element in every social interaction, a life history produced in response to interviewer questions that are not known in advance is likely to yield a less carefully controlled product. The ultimate evaluation of the life history in this respect can be arrived at by considering the context in which the life history was obtained, as well as by indicators of the recounter's readiness to be

forthcoming and to strive for veridicality. The reader of Tony Santangelo's life history is likely to judge that he is ingenuous and forthright.

Tony Santangelo was the second of a dozen Yorkville men whose life histories I obtained. I had originally attempted to obtain interviewees by writing letters on City College stationery explaining my purpose to men living in the Stanley Isaacs Houses and Holmes Towers, two New York City public housing projects in Yorkville. My follow-up phone calls resulted only in refusals. I received help in gaining referrals from Charles I. Katze, then Executive Director of the Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center, adjacent to the projects. He acted as intermediary and introduced me to my first few life history informants, some of whom lived in the projects and some in the tenements on the nearby streets. Tony had been a tenement dweller but had moved into the projects eight years before. I told Katze that I wanted to obtain life histories from working-class men who had grown up in and lived most of their lives in Yorkville. I told him also that I would pay the men \$4 per hour for their time.² He conveyed this information to Tony and to others who agreed to be interviewed. These initial life history informants subsequently helped recruit friends and acquaintances in a "snowball sample." Katze provided me with a room in the Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center where I could interview the men in privacy. They thus were interviewed in a building in their own neighborhood, one that was familiar and congenial. The interviews were tape recorded, and they were transcribed by the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University, which sought and retained a copy of the transcripts for its own archive. To each interviewee I gave a copy of his transcript in a hardcover binder.

Life histories are collected for many purposes. Anthropologists have long collected them as a means to illuminate the cultures of the life history informants (Kluckhohn 1945; Langness 1965; Langness and Frank 1981; Watson and Watson-Franke 1985). Sociologists have solicited written autobiographies to illuminate delinquency (Shaw 1966 [1930]; Bennett 1981), as well as life history interviews to explain entry into an occupation (Berteaux and Berteaux 1981). Psychologists have collected them to study personality development (Allport 1942; Frenkel 1936; White 1952; McAdams 1988). Feminist scholars have gathered life histories to document the particular qualities of women's lives (Behar 1990, 1993; Patai 1988a, 1988b; Personal Narratives Group 1989).

One feature common to many (though not all) such efforts, regardless of the researcher's goal, was that the researcher sustained an acquaintance of long duration with the life history interviewee. The life history was obtained over a period of months or even years of research, and Plummer seems to maintain that that is the only correct procedure (Plummer 1983, p. 14; cf. also Langness 1965, p. 35.) Such extended interview time may be necessary or desirable in many research situations, but it should not be regarded as an inflexible rule of methodology. Adequate sponsorship may

yield suitable access in a short time frame. The study presented here, as well as related studies in collateral papers (Handel 1984, 1991, 1994) undertakes to show that a considerable and significant understanding of the experienced life course can be gained from life histories that are obtained in a much shorter time and do not depend upon developing an extended relationship with the life history informants. The life history of Tony Santangelo was obtained in two interviews six days apart, the first lasting three hours and the second two hours. The resulting transcript of 145 double-spaced pages was one of the two briefest of the twelve men whom I interviewed. While there is little question that more interviewing time extended over a longer acquaintance would probably have yielded more information, that proposition begs the methodological question, which is: Can we learn sufficient information from a two- or three-interview life history to portray convincingly the experienced life course of the recounter, and can we gain from it sufficient understanding of underlying processes to justify additional efforts of this kind? This study was not conceived as an extended fieldwork study but as a specific type of qualitative interview study. Many researchers are likely to be similarly situated, able to commit five to ten hours to gathering a life history, but not months or years. While each reader will have to make his or her own judgment regarding the methodological question, my own conviction is that Tony Santangelo's life history is one of the fullest and most comprehensive recent portraits of an ordinary, urban working-class man in early middle age. In addition, I believe that the interpretive effort I have made in Part III presents concepts that improve our understanding of his experienced life course and offers guidelines that may be used for understanding the experienced life course of women as well as men, and adults of any age.

Thus far I have distinguished among three ways of producing a life history. The initial distinction is between an *autobiographer*, who writes the story of his life and produces a crafted account, and a *recounter*, who responds to interviewer initiative and questions, spontaneously drawing on his memory of his life. Within the latter category I made a further distinction between a life history gathered over an extended period of acquaintance with the subject and a life history gathered in two or three interviews conducted within one or two weeks and totaling between five and ten hours. No terminology exists for this distinction, so I propose to call them *acquaintance-based* and *interview-based* life histories. Although the former is also based on interview, the terms seem to me to convey a useful temporal and relational distinction.

The interview-based life history may seem to be vulnerable to thinness of information. Readers of Tony Santangelo's life history may wish that I had asked one or another further question not found in the transcription or that I had had one interview more to cover some areas not covered. (I also see places where I should have asked a follow-up question, and in Part III I

discuss an important information gap that resulted.) The interview-based life history, as a way of finding out about lives, is at one end of a spectrum whose opposite pole is the longitudinal study. The longitudinal study, which gathers interviews and other information from subjects at successive times over a period of many years, even decades, would seem to be a more satisfactory way of finding out about lives. Yet, in addition to the fact that decades-long longitudinal studies are enormously expensive and therefore few in number, the belief that they are comprehensive in their informativeness by virtue of their decades-long data gathering may well be an illusion. The words of John Clausen in this regard are sobering. In 1960, Clausen became the Director of the Institute of Human Development at the University of California, Berkeley. In that capacity he also took over directorship of the Oakland Growth Study established by Herbert Stolz and Harold E. Jones in 1931–32. Eleven- and twelve-year-old children were “observed, questioned, measured, and tested on more than a hundred different occasions” over a period of six years until they graduated from high school. When Clausen took over, a major follow-up study was being completed as these people neared age forty. And yet with all these data gathered in childhood and in adulthood, Clausen writes in his foreword to a study based on them, Glen Elder’s well-regarded *Children of the Great Depression*:

Even in longitudinal research there are inevitably gaps in one’s knowledge. One could not possibly monitor or review all of the salient experiences of a single individual, even if one knew how to ask all of the relevant questions. (Clausen, in Elder, 1974, p. xviii)

Clausen is, of course, correct in this. But he tries to transcend these limitations by proposing, in his next sentence, “Under such circumstances, the richer and more diverse the data collected by earlier investigators, the greater the likelihood that their successors will be able to address research questions not previously formulated” (p. xviii). While there is some validity to this judgment, it also points to an unattainable, ever receding goal, since successors are always likely to have questions that have not and could not have been anticipated by their predecessors.

Understanding a life is a task without limit. It can never be completed because we can never know all there is to know. Even when a life is over, there are always new questions. And there will always be gaps in one’s information, not to speak of limitations of perspicacity. Nevertheless, it is a challenge that fascinates and beckons, and if we work with the information we have and ask significant questions, we can presume to move toward some understanding of a life and of lives as processes. Tony Santangelo told us a great deal about his life in five hours of interview, enough to make it possible to seek understanding of it and to ask questions and formulate concepts that will be useful in understanding other lives as well.

The heading of this section, "The Narrative Context," has a double referent. The discussion thus far has been about the context in which the oral narrative was obtained. Its presentation as a printed text is a second narrative context. In a generally laudatory review of three anthropological life histories, obtained by what I have called the acquaintance-based procedure, Crapanzano (1984) is critical of Shostak's (1981) life history of a !Kung woman because "she does not include her own interventions in 'Nisa's text'" (Crapanzano 1984, p. 957). He also notes that all three are given little analysis by the anthropologists who obtained and presented them (Crapanzano 1984, p. 958). The present work contrasts with these in both respects. My questions and comments are retained, so that the reader can judge in what ways they have shaped the text. The reader can utilize this verbatim text to think about additional or alternative questions, better-phrased questions, and alternative procedures for the entire enterprise. In addition, I provide, in Part III, an analysis of Tony Santangelo's life history, and the reader can utilize the text to evaluate the analysis, since the text has not been edited or rearranged. The reader has the entire identical text that I had.

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Life histories are gathered for many purposes. Diversity of purpose, as well as of technique, is discussed by Kluckhohn (1945), Angell (1945), Langness and Frank (1981), and Watson and Watson-Franke (1985). John Dollard (1935) proposed a set of criteria to be used in evaluating all life histories. Gordon Allport (1942) criticized this effort on the grounds that "Dollard's criteria will not bring social scientists to agree on the value of a document. . . . The point is that while Dollard formulates his own preferences he does not succeed in establishing objective standards by which to command the consent of his readers to his evaluations" (p. 27). But, given the diverse purposes for which life histories are gathered, the larger point to be made is that any effort to establish universal criteria is very likely inappropriate and misdirected. Allport, for example, distinguishes between comprehensive and topical autobiographies. A comprehensive autobiography "is one that deals with a relatively large number of lines of experience, giving a picture of variety, roundness and interrelatedness in the life" (Allport 1942, p. 77). A topical autobiography is "short and specialized in content" (p. 76). How could comprehensive and topical autobiographies be judged by the same criteria?

Disregarding Allport's use of "autobiography" as a generic term for all kinds of life histories, however produced, his distinction between comprehensive and topical is a useful one. For example, the best known life history produced soon after Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) work is a topical one, Shaw's *The Jack-Roller, A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Shaw [1930] 1966), which focused on a boy's trauancies, delinquencies, and arrests in an

effort to understand how his delinquency developed into a delinquent career.³ In contrast, my effort was to obtain a comprehensive life history from Tony Santangelo and the other men I interviewed. Whereas Shaw began by interviewing the boy to obtain an account of all his delinquencies and arrests, which were then arranged in a chronological sequence and returned to him in a list for use as a guide in writing his "own story" (Shaw 1966 [1930], p. 23), I began with a general instruction: "I'd like you to tell me the story of your life. Begin at the beginning and tell me as much as you remember. Then I'll ask you some questions." I specifically did not want to delineate any topics in advance. I defined the task as openly as I could because I wanted each man to construct his account as fully as possible in his own way. The fruitfulness of this open approach becomes quickly evident in the very different ways that they "begin at the beginning." (See the discussion of the difference between Tony Santangelo and Frank Schmidt in Handel 1994).

The openness of my approach corresponded to my purpose. I wanted to use life histories to open wider the study of the life course. At the outset I was not sure where my work would lead, but it was based on the general premise that human action is fundamentally interpretive. My general guide was W. I. Thomas's celebrated dictum: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." To be sure, I also had a general research issue in mind, the issue of continuity and discontinuity in the life course. Thus the question "How is childhood experience related to adult life?" was one that underlies this endeavor, and I return to it later in this section as well as in Part III. What I needed to work with were statements—life histories—that captured as pristinely as possible my informants' own construction of their lives.

As I worked on the project, it became clear to me that the term "the life course" is not a unitary construction. Initially, I had trouble relating what I was trying to do to the literature on the life course. I realized I had to address the difficulty by trying to clarify what it is about the life course that one learns from a life history and how that differs from what is learned about the life course from other kinds of data and procedures. While I do not attempt a comprehensive review of all the ways the term is used, I cite here a few leading uses and then state my own.

John Clausen (1986, p. 2) observes that "The life course is, by definition, a progression through time." He briefly examines several approaches that differ in their focus and in how they conceive of that progression. He defines his own goal as describing "the expectable life course" (p. 1), and this concept of expectability is implicit in other definitions. Elder and Rockwell (1979, pp. 2–3) state that "The life course refers to . . . social patterns in the timing, duration, spacing and order of events and roles . . . [T]he individual life course is comprised of interlocking careers, such as those of work, marriage, and parenthood."

More recently Elder and O'Rand (1995, p. 453) stated: "The life course represents a concept and a theoretical perspective. As a concept, it refers to age-graded life patterns embedded in social institutions and subject to historical change. The life course consists of interlocking trajectories or pathways across the life span that are marked by sequences of events and social transitions." Other scholars adopt similar conceptualizations. In seeking to draw a clear terminological distinction between "life span development" as used in psychology and "life course" as a sociological concept, Hagestad and Neugarten (1985, p. 35) state that "a life course approach concentrates on age-related transitions that are *socially created, socially recognized, and shared*." Kohli (1986b, p. 271) argues that "the life course can be conceptualized as a social institution . . . a pattern of rules ordering a key dimension of life." Sørensen (1986, p. 178) writes that "because of the association between the positions an individual occupies and what this individual does, believes, and possesses, main features of individuals' life courses can be described by the major positions individuals occupy during their lifetime. Major positions are generally not occupied in a random order. It therefore becomes an important part of the sociology of the life course to describe and analyze the patterning of positions over the life span.

These brief quotations of several scholars' definitions of the life course cannot do justice either to the richness of their studies or to the full diversity of life course research. But, together, they do point to one very dominant trend in the field—looking at the life course as it is shaped by social structure. There is no escaping social structure; every life is shaped by it, but that is not all that goes into a life nor all that there is to be said about it.

The approaches entailed in the quoted definitions are valid approaches, but they leave out much. First, they leave out the perspective of the individual, for whom the social structure is not a well-charted path or a well-enclosed and well-marked series of corridors but a complex reality that is full of ambiguity, apprehended only gradually, understood incrementally and very imperfectly, and negotiated through trial and error. What is omitted from these approaches is a clear and decisive characterization of the human being as an interpretive being, who must interpret situations with a continuing mix of current perspective, retrospective recall, and prospective anticipated outcomes. Second, they don't pay much attention to what individuals feel about various aspects of their lives. They do not capture satisfaction, disappointment, and self-criticism nor elation, complacency, and dread. Third, by conceiving of the life course in terms of positions, events, rules, and careers, they leave out consideration of how people enjoy themselves, experiences of sociability, amusement and friendship. Fourth, they do not deal with flouting of rules as an experiential issue. In brief, social structural approaches to the life course are necessary but not sufficient.

The theoretical position underlying the study of the life course by the life history method can be stated in the following propositions, which develop

and refine ideas first presented in Handel 1994: (1) A life history produces an account of a person's currently available biography. (2) It is made up of several kinds of constitutive elements—events, encounters, practices, emotions, relationships, interpretive judgments, and evaluations. (3) Through a sustained process of remembering and telling to the interviewer, the recounter constitutes his life course as an object which he claims as his own in the telling, which he claims as his life course as he has experienced it and knows it.⁴ (4) Just as the self functions reflexively in all its transactions with social objects (Mead 1934), the production of a life history representing the experienced life course is a reflexive activity of the person's self. It is the product of an inner dialogue which arises in response to an interpersonal dialogue between interviewer and interviewee, and it becomes part of the latter. (5) The constitutive elements of the life history—including their syntax, sequence, and relative proportions—can be understood as having various kinds of symbolic meaning to the recounter. All represent various aspects of his life. They therefore provide a basis for additional analysis by an interpreter who wishes to utilize them for exploring the nature of and understanding the experienced life course as a domain of human experience.

The interpretive methodology in social science, long known by the Weberian keyword *verstehen* but now more commonly referred to as hermeneutic, is a generic concept that encompasses diverse approaches to interpretation. Two of these approaches, the Freudian psychoanalytic and the symbolic interactionist, have long been considered polar opposites. That opposition constituted for me the puzzle that led me to initiate an exploration of the life course through the life history method. A central point of contention is whether adult life should be interpreted as determined by earlier experience or whether it is essentially constructed and newly emergent in ongoing interaction. In the first third of the twentieth century, psychoanalytic theory developed by Freud viewed childhood experience as having a deterministic effect on later life. Philip Rieff summarized Freud's approach in these words:

Freud took development for granted. That children become adults, that the lower becomes higher, the simple complex, the unknown known—such optimistic commonplaces he shunned. His desire was always to find, in emergence, sameness; in the dynamic, the static; in the present, latent pasts. (Rieff 1961, p. 237)

Freud's view exemplifies one of what Gergen (1980) has called the two established theories of the life course, "the stability account." The other he calls "the ordered change account." This type of theory, most prominently exemplified by Erikson (1950) and Levinson (1978), regards the person as passing through a series of predetermined stages. Despite their differences, both types of theory are deterministic. In Freud's version, childhood expe-

rience determines the forms of later experiences. In Erikson's and Levinson's versions, the life course consists of a series of built-in stages.

Gergen proposes a different alternative, which he calls "aleatoric." This type of theory "calls attention to the flexibility of developmental patterns. . . . From this perspective, existing patterns appear potentially evanescent, the unstable result of the particular juxtaposition of contemporary historical events" (1980, p. 34). The aleatoric perspective views the person "as an active agent, capable of self-direction and change" (Starr 1983).

The most absolute statement of this view is provided by Brim (1974) in an unpublished paper quoted by Starr: "any man can change in any way, at any time" (Starr 1983, p. 258.) How could this occur? It could occur because a person is capable of interpreting himself, his actions, his situation, his potentialities. Person as active interpreter is one of the core ideas of the symbolic interactionist theory of human behavior originating in the ideas of Charles Horton Cooley, W. I. Thomas, and, most influential, George Herbert Mead. No theorist has asserted this idea more vigorously than Herbert Blumer, the student of George Herbert Mead and the man who both coined the term symbolic interaction and was long the dominant exponent of symbolic interactionism as theory of society and human action. Blumer wrote:

The prevailing practice of psychology and sociology is to treat social interaction as a neutral medium, as a mere forum for the operation of outside factors. Thus psychologists are led to account for the behavior of people in interaction by resorting to elements of the psychological equipment of the participants—such elements as motives, feelings, attitudes, or personality organization. Sociologists do the same sort of thing by resorting to societal factors such as cultural prescriptions, values, social roles, or structural pressures. Both miss the central point that human interaction is a positive shaping process in its own right. The participants in it have to build up their respective lines of action. As participants take account of each other's acts, they have to arrest, reorganize, or adjust their own intentions, wishes, feelings, and attitudes; similarly, they have to judge the fitness of norms, values, and group prescriptions for the situation being formed by the acts of others. Factors of psychological equipment and social organization are not substitutes for the interpretative process; they are admissible only in terms of how they are handled in the interpretative process. (Blumer 1969, p. 66)

Blumer's statement is, essentially, an elaboration of George Herbert Mead's presentation of the concept of emergence:

Practically, of course, the novel is constantly happening and the recognition of this gets its expression in more general terms in the concept of emergence. Emergence involves a reorganization, but the reorganization brings in something that was not there before. . . . In a society there must be a set of common organized habits of response found in all, but the way in which individuals act under specific circumstances gives rise to all of the individual differences

which characterize the different persons. The fact that they have to act in a certain common fashion does not deprive them of originality. The common language is there, but a different use of it is made in every new contact between persons; the element of novelty in the reconstruction takes place through the reaction of the individuals to the group to which they belong. (Mead 1934, p. 198)

The contrast between Freud and the symbolic interactionist views of Mead and Blumer with regard to the concept of emergence could hardly be more dramatic. To Freud, sameness and latent pasts were more important than emergence. To Mead and Blumer, every new human interaction brings a reorganization, an emergence of novelty. To the psychoanalyst, the adult patient is unconsciously interpreting situations through a lens left over from childhood, and the psychoanalyst must learn how to interpret these patient interpretations. To Mead and Blumer, new interpretations are demanded by each interaction and each situation a person is in. A life course is constantly emerging in novelty, not reenacting childhood experience. And yet, what is one to make of Blumer's comment later in the same essay quoted above: "Social action, since it has a career, is recognized as having a historical dimension which has to be taken into account in order to be adequately understood" (Blumer 1969, p. 77)?

To paraphrase Mead, a life course consists of individualized social actions, concatenated in one person's lifetime. Each has a historical dimension. Might not some of them lead as far back as childhood? Does Blumer's formulation grant that some understanding of the experienced life course of a man in his forties is contributed by knowing something of his childhood experiences? One begins to think that what initially seemed a sharp polarization between Freud's and the Mead-Blumer view of emergence is not as profound as it first appeared. To be sure, as Guy Swanson once wrote, in a source I cannot now locate, "It is evident that Mead and Freud had quite different aspects of behavior at the center of their attention" (Swanson 1967, p. 29), and the present discussion in no way implies otherwise. But it does argue that the historical dimension accorded to social action in Blumer's formulation adds complexity and qualification to the concept of emergence. A life course is not simply a process of emergence. There are threads of continuity. The apparent polarity between Freud and Mead constituted for me a puzzle that has led me, in Part III, to a novel conceptualization of the relationship between childhood and adulthood. But in true symbolic interactionist fashion, my study of Tony Santangelo's life history propelled me beyond this puzzle into analyses that I did not anticipate beforehand.

A second puzzle engaged me as well. The lack of optimism that Rieff notes in Freud has a counterpart in sociological analyses of the working class. Working-class people have a hard life. S. M. Miller provided a capsule summary of their difficulties in an early paper. In addition to a high rate of

unemployment, their life is marked by “low wages, their inadequate housing . . . the poor schooling offered their children, the neglect of public services in their neighborhoods, the frequent callousness of the police and welfare departments, their bilking by merchants—in short their second-class economic and political citizenship . . .” (Miller 1964a, p. 9). In another paper, he identified four different categories of working-class people: the stable poor, the strained, the copers, and the unstable (Miller 1964b). These are surely four variations on a theme of misery. Later studies by Sennett and Cobb (1973), Rubin (1976), and Howell (1984) add to the picture of hardship, pain, and dismal life. When these accumulated and convergent accounts of working-class life are considered alongside Mead’s concept of emergence and novelty—which offers optimistic as well as pessimistic prospects—interesting questions arise. How does a working-class man maneuver in hardscrabble conditions? What does he see as constraints? What does he see as opportunities? What choices does he have? At what points in the life course do choices appear? Are there chinks in the wall of constraint? What does it take to get through them to the other side?

My two puzzles are parts of the same larger puzzle, which constitutes the central issue of this study and which I see as one of the central issues of the life course. My concern is with the issue of constraint and agency over a life course, as perceived and interpreted by a man who must make some kind of sense of his life as he has lived it, lives it now, and expects to live it. As the literatures of both working-class life and structural approaches to the life course imply, this life is subject to certain probabilities. The life history gets us as close as we are able to get to seeing how a man deals with those probabilities over the lifetime he has lived up to the time of recounting in early middle age, how he has concatenated his experiences into an experienced life course.

NOTES

1. One category of exception to the general prominence and celebrity of autobiographers is the national autobiography competitions conducted in Poland, Finland, and other East European and Scandinavian countries (Denzin 1989, pp. 59–60).

2. The minimum wage in 1974 was \$2 per hour. *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994*. National Data Book, Table 669, “Effective Federal Minimum Hourly Wage Rates: 1950–1993 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994).

3. For a fascinating account and analysis of how collection of life histories from delinquents became a widespread activity see James Bennett, *Oral History and Delinquency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

4. Notice must be taken that a life history obtained at a particular point in time yields what may be called a *currently available biography*. Cohler (1982) takes the view that a person’s “personal narrative” of his life is continually changing, but he cites no studies that document and support his view. One may speculate that the

available biography may be more or less coextensive with the available biography that might be produced at another point in time. One may also speculate that some of the constitutive elements (events, judgments, etc.) produced in any given recounting would recur in subsequent recountings, so that these more or less stable elements of narrative may be thought of as constituting the person's *governing biography*, his experienced life course that endures through temporal change. The length of the temporal interval between discrete recountings would be a factor in the degree of continuity and change, as would be the occurrence of experiences that were of major interpretive significance to the recounter. Unless two or more life histories at different times are produced by the same person(s), we can have no firm conviction about how much a person's available biography changes from one time to another. The currently available biography is what we have to work with.

Not long ago I encountered an African American student who had taken a course with me a year or two previously. I said hello and was about to greet him by name when he announced a Muslim name, which was different from the very Anglo-Saxon name by which he was known when he was in my class. Clearly, I could infer that there had been a major change in his experienced life course. If I had been fortunate enough to have obtained two recountings of his life history, one at the time I first knew him and one since he changed his name, I would undoubtedly have discovered some important elements in the second that were not present in the first. But it is by no means certain that one could not find a stable governing biography in the two successive available biographies, along with new experiential elements. Without the material, the question is undecidable.