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EXPLANATION AND INDIVIDUAL LIVES: A RECONSIDERATION OF LIFE WRITING IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Kenneth Little

INTRODUCTION

Dollard (1935), Kluckhohn (1945) and Langness (1965) in their more or less comprehensive treatments of the life history as it is used in anthropology, attempted to shape and define its objectives and provide a valid frame of reference for analyzing and interpreting life history data. For example, John Dollard, as early as 1935, attempted to provide a general theoretical basis for the use of the life history. The criteria he formulated required that an individual under investigation be understood in his/her social and cultural contexts. It also required that the life history be organized and conceptualized within an analytical framework. The result was to be a conceptualized scientific statement that would integrate, relate, and govern the material observed [1]. In his analysis, done ten years later, Kluckhohn bemoaned the fact that the life history documents of anthropologists lacked any critical, scientific analysis and interpretation. He therefore added such a chapter in which he summarized the value of these documents as scientific source materials. He also indicated how they could be used to form broader generalizations for further scientific research [2].

Both Dollard and Kluckhohn were attempting to give a certain validity to life history research. It is generally argued that until 1935 no concise statement had ever been made concerning the uses of such documents, and it was not until Kluckhohn's 1945 analysis that any clear concern had been given to methods of collecting life histories as well as indicating the scientific purposes to which they could be put [3]. Kluckhohn [4] argued that until 1945 most life histories could be labeled only as "interesting curiosities". He stated further that:

> There is a sizeable bulk of biographical material available, but its significance – from either the cultural or personological angles – has not been expounded. Analysis has been almost entirely limited to drawing attention to very specific, and sometimes trivial, ethnographic points. Annotation has been highly, but scarcely systematically, selective ... Psychological analysis by an anthropologist of a life history from a nonliterate group remains to be tried [5].

Langness' 1965 survey [6] assessed the various trends in life history research in anthropology up to and including that year. Anthropologists, he argues, continue to collect and use life histories mostly in a manner that best serves their individual purposes. For example, the life history was being used to test, analyze, or exemplify certain constructs of cultural personality as they cohere in individual character adaptation [7], personality adaptation in cultural conflict situations [8], the effects of sociocultural systems on individual personality and adaptation [9], the subjective side of

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family dynamics [10], social factors and personal motivations that are involved in religious conversion [11]. Here, I mention only a few of the major works. To this list may be added another one suggesting the potential use of the life history in unmasking various aspects of culture structure, status and role, community patterns, acquisition of culture, culture change, deviance, etc. [12].

I believe that from most of this work two general statements may be extracted: first, that the life history is often used for concerns other than the study of an individual as an individual. Lives are usually studied to shed light on some aspects of culture, personality or on the psychological dimensions of culture changes or adaptation. Second, that the agreed methodological principle when anthropologists use life histories, although their theories may differ in emphasis and detail, is that one must apply some analytical technique to the life history material as a way of doing something with the document, otherwise it remains purely descriptive and, in an analytical sense, wasted.

Accordingly, anthropologists continue to recognize that the life history document can be taken as important and interesting in its own right. However, consensus of opinion suggests that such documents must be used to serve other purposes. Life histories are used not merely to describe a life but rather, to *explain* it through analysis and interpretation. As such, this work bears a family resemblance to the analytical models embodied in the structured observations and procedures that are generally used for hypothesis testing. Their frame of reference remains the analytical model while, at a more abstract level, their purpose is the discovery of general laws of human behaviour. What frequently happens when an anthropologist attempts to study an individual life for the purpose of describing and understanding the specific and unique features of that life, is that such descriptions are "used in the service of illuminating more general and presumably more relevant psychological concerns, such as national character, modal personality, or the psychological basis of social integration, to mention only a few of the possibilities" [13].

There is an impressively wide range of approaches to and research that can be done with the life history. The surveys I mentioned reveal the versatility that scholars imagine the life history to possess. And yet, while there is agreement that the life history does apparently enable us to "explain" a life, I suggest that very little work has been centered on "comprehending" a person's life.

This paper, then, addresses itself to the problem of studying individuals as individuals [14], rather than studying individuals for the purpose of understanding personality, psychological patterns, cultural patterns, adaptation or change. If we turn to the study of an individual's life with the intention of studying that life as unique and particular, we face a very different set of problems and assumptions. If this approach is followed it yields a mode of confronting an individual life and an understanding of human events and experiences that need not be based on the set of theoretical preunderstandings that ground an analytical mode of investigation.

My discussion, accordingly, moves from the logic and limits of the explanation of an individual's life which rests on the specifications of an analytical model through a reconsideration of Paul Radin's use of the life history; to an exploration of some of the possibilities of refining and adding to Radin's very important first steps in the use of the life history.

The first part of my discussion re-evaluates the power of causal analysis as it is applied to the scientific explanation of a person's life. In other words, the problem of using the life history to talk about "a personality type", "culture pattern", and so on, "is that the investigator imposes or infers constructs that are frankly alien to the individual life as it is related" [15]. It is my contention that as this scientific project reveals itself as an imposed

structure on the life of an individual, it becomes preoccupied with the critical analysis of its own concepts or of those of previous systems which arise *not* out of an individual's life but from theorizing.

In the second part of my discussion I will focus on Radin's life history work, which is grounded in a humanistic image of anthropology. Radin's effort is founded upon a different kind of understanding in anthropology, one based more on "comprehension" than on "explanation". There is, in short, a kind of understanding that Radin explored that is independent of scientific explanation. It consists of familiarity with an individual life in its sociocultural context, in a comprehensive vision of its configuration and in the relationship which exists between the investigator and the person whose life is being investigated. It is the sort of understanding that is achieved through a personal hermeneutic.

This kind of understanding "does not occur when we try to intercept what someone wants to say to us by claiming we already know it" [16]. In other words, what is said about a person's life here is not something that presents itself as the content to the logical form of a scientific model. Rather, it is what we will allow to be said to us by another life, the recognition of which suggests what we will be able to ask and say next about that life. This is the sense of the term understanding that we intend when we speak of one person understanding another, meaning insight and acquaintance, and it seems to me that this is the sense in which Radin understands and comprehends Sam Blowsnake [17].

If understanding by insight and acquaintance is one of the many aims of life writing, and I am inclined to believe that it should be, then its proper aim is description and comprehension and not explanation. The third part of my discussion will outline what I mean by insight and acquaintance. In doing so I will describe this alternative way of viewing understanding in anthropology, one that incorporates a philosophical hermeneutics and that always accompanies the description of a person's life, whether we recognize it or not [18].

EXPLAINING LIVES

My interest here lies in questioning the process of explaining a life. As I understand it, explanation and analysis rest on the synthesis of data according to the preselected categories of a model [19]. This process Watson argues, depends on two operations:

> First, the data are broken down in segmental fashion and evaluated against the model for the purpose of being categorized or labeled. Secondly, some events are then given particular causal or dynamic saliency and the others are reorganized around them in the way the model specifies [20].

If the model, which includes within it a causal logic, is imposed on a person's life as an explanatory apparatus, then "interferences must ... be made which depend for their verification on data sources of an entirely different order than the subjective report contained in the life history itself" [21]. As the image of a person begins to emerge from these data sources, it may show an alarming lack of agreement with the experiential ordering in a person's life. What is understood about a person's life as it emerges in the data is determined by the preselected categories of the theory one uses. But when an author displays his theory for explaining a life for some purpose (be it a theory of personality formulation, cultural or psychological mechanisms for change, etc.) he/she is, in Kendall's [22] words, "telling" rather than "showing", ordering the experiences of his/her subject into a series of connected elements that are then assembled in a way that conforms with his/her theory. For example, Erikson argues that what is required in his biography of Martin Luther is that the reported events and experiences in Luther's life "not contradict other well established facts; persist in having a ring of truth; and yield a meaning consistent with psychological theory" [23].

However, the integrity of subjectivity in life writing is violated when this kind of analysis is applied, because it involves abstracting remotely from the particular subject's life experiences for the sake of using them to explain something else, be it a theory of personality formation, or whatever. This is one of the largest difficulties about fixing explanations to something as alive, vital, unique and subjective as a person's life. A person's life experiences simply are less orderly and more subjective than their explanation requires.

One question that comes to mind from what I have said is whether an explanatory framework in life writing based on theory has always been the accepted way of writing within the *genre.* I thought some answer might shed light on the more general history of life writing and serve to clarify the historical context and goals of anthropological life writing. I began by reviewing the earliest period of writing within this *genre.*

With the rise of the philosophical-scientific aspirations of the eighteenth century, social philosophers sought to formulate laws governing the course of human history, human nature, and the evolution of culture. The nineteenth century saw the continued advancement of the natural sciences and the science of man culminated in the triumphs of Darwin and Spencer. By this time the specific anthropological expressions of the science of man were being formulated. I wanted to know whether the philosophical-scientific goals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century had any effect on the goals of life writing during the same period.

Many of those who have written on life writing during these two centuries suggested that it was considered to be an art of sympathetic description of an individual's life; even a critical reaction to the implications of a scientific world view [24]. This is apparent, for example, in David Hume's life writing attempts. The eighteenth century philosopher, Noxon argues, in his "classic of empiricism (*A Treatise on Human Nature*) "... propounds a comprehensive psychological system wherein mental and emotional processes would find their explanation as exemplifying a few highly general laws and principles" [25]. This was a "theoretical system of psychology modeled on Newtonian mechanics" [26]. But Hume reversed his own position when he turned to the practice of biography. Noxon argues further that Hume "did so because he lost confidence in the explanatory power of highly general psychological principles when applied to individual lives" [27]. Accordingly, the vivid life-portraits that make up Hume's *The History of England* are "imbued with life and humanity drawn from Hume's interest in temperament and personality, the feeling for the small, revealing incident, his sense of the unique combination of features and qualities which define the individual" [28]. Noxon adds that Hume, "In turning away from general theory of human nature toward the history of individual lives ... was moving in the prevailing direction of the age in which biography established itself as a major literary genre" [29].

In *Truth to Life,* A.J.O. Cockshut [30] reviews the tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century biographers. The biographers of these centuries adopted an "emblematic view" of the individual. The advantages of such a view stem from the fact that

> ... it does not assert a dubious proposition as if it were a fact. But it does not deny the possibility that a real influence on the future may have been at work. It is an open view; it is poetically suggestive ... It preserves the mystery of personality; it preserves the salutary humility of all good biography in the august presence of another soul ... Emblematic events ... are hints towards the meaning of the whole ... the finished biography is more ... a report upon an obscure but momentous work of art [31].

It has only been within our own century that life writing has fully incorporated an explanatory framework based on theory [32]. Twentieth century life writing in anthropology, psychology, history and literature have been inspired by this prevailing trust in psychologi-

cal and cultural theory to explain a life. Indeed life writing for professional purposes in anthropology has been firmly established within "theory grounded life writing". One of the earliest and clearest statements of this kind of work was spelled out by Dollard. He suggusted that the anthropologist

> ... must do the critical work of fashioning the necessary concepts, of making the required connections and of piecing the whole life history together to make plain and scientific communication easy...
> Like any scientific conceptual scheme this one will possess coherence and an ordered character; in the end one will be able to step conceptually from one concept in the system to any other; each term will apply the necessary existence of the others and unlinked or contradictory concepts will be recognized as defects in the system and will invite research urgently ...
> The scientific formulation ... will recognize the preexisting totality of the culture, give relevant organic formulation, explain in detail how organic life is welded into social action ... [33].

Again, Dollard's work reflected one of the earliest over all interests in the professional use of life history to portray cultural facts and to formulate scientific statements. I have already described Kluckhohn's desire to make these documents scientific source materials, and since Kluckhohn's time, the various other scientific uses to which the life history has been put. Within these various fields of study, there remains a close adherence to the scientific explanation of a person's life.

RADIN'S USE OF THE LIFE HISTORY

Radin's work with the life history should be regarded as a major source of another kind of understanding, understanding by comprehension rather than explanation. Thus, one can only wonder at the way in which the majority of anthropologists have viewed Radin's work in the area of life history. Watson [34] states, for example, that Radin used the life history "as a supplementary source of data to infer cultural patterns". Radin, according to Langness "was interested only in culture and not in the individual per se, the individual-in-culture or in personality" [35]. Kluckhohn suggests that the Crashing Thunder autobiography "has greater value for the student of culture than for the student of persons-in-culture" [36]. Mandelbaum explains how Radin "showed that a life history narrative could add much to an ethnological account" [37]. Radin, Mandelbaum argues, does not analyze his material other than in his extensive footnotes which tell more about Winnebago culture or culture patterns than of personality or personal adaptation. Like Lurie, Mandelbaum believes that Radin's life history is based more on "descriptive presentation than on conceptual development" [38]. And maybe most importantly, Dollard argues that Radin's life history materials must not be taken as a document of a human life at all because

> ... there is very little attempt at analysis and synthesis of the material ... The editor's [Radin's] comments, while revealing and sympathetic, are few and characterized by a literary and impressionistic admiration rather than by a laborious theoretical construction of Crashing Thunder's life experience [39].

But to argue, as Dollard does, that Radin was not interested in a scientific theoretical analysis of some aspect of Crashing Thunder's life experience as being proof of his disinterest in the individual is incorrect. It also means that neither Dollard nor these others have read Radin's *Method and Theory of Ethnology* very carefully.

Radin does announce his objective, in writing Crashing Thunder's life history, "the aim being not to obtain autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative, middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he has grown up" [40]. In other words, Radin is not interested in the specific particulars and detailed information about the individual personality but neither is he interested in the general patterns of social and cultural life per se. Instead he is

interested in a particular "individual as an individual" in relation to the social and cultural contexts within which that person lives.

The result of Radin's work is a document that presents Crashing Thunder as one person caught between two cultures and his quest for a good way of life. Radin provides us with a view of personal disruption in Crashing Thunder's life under the onslaught of a new ideology, the Peyote Cult. Religion, in this case, is seen primarily as a personal rather than a social experience. David Sapir strengthens this argument when he states that for Radin "it is the particular performance of the particular raconteur that is of utmost importance..." [41].

One also gets more than a clue to what Radin means to do with life history materials if we look at the way in which he considers how a life history is to be collected. Radin [42] insisted that the description of an individual's life and his place in his culture can be accomplished only if we start from "internal evidence." He could not stress enough the value of beginning *any* ethnographic description from this point.

The first task is acquiring the internal evidence; that is, the description of the life of a person as he tells it. Radin stresses this as the text and it is the text that constitutes the major part of the life history documents that he collected and presented. Second, a personal and cultural history must be provided. These are the contextual aspects of the events that make up the subject's life, and are necessary for elucidating the events in the subject's life. Third, Radin suggests that we must remember to stay as close as possible to the events and experiences in the subject's life. For example, David Sapir suggests that Radin's,

> ... concern with the facts is evident in everything he wrote. He seemed hesitant to make abstract generalizations and what ones he did make were always supported by considerable data. I remember once having quite an argument with him in which he staunchly supported the "five-foot shelf anthropologist": at least *they* got all the facts ... [43].

For Radin the life history seemed the best way of combining these three aspects of study.

It is my contention that Radin in his work with Crashing Thunder was doing not only good ethnography but sound hermeneutics. The decription of a person's life from internal evidence puts Radin's work in line with what I suggest is a hermeneutical perspective in anthropology. But how did Radin do his work and what makes it hermeneutical?

Radin argues that in describing a person's life we are given the unique opportunity of being able to combine both the internal evidence (the text) and contextual aspects of the events that make up a person's life. Again, the text, as Radin saw it, is the personal document itself while the contexts are the ethnographic materials that describe the social, cultural and historical milieu within which the subject lives or lived. Such description incorporates native texts myths, folk tales, various shorter individual life histories) historical background of the culture, social structure and other pertinent social and cultural information. Through the extensive use of such ethnographic description in the forms of Winnebago texts and social and cultural background, Radin formulated the interplay between the individuals and his culture. Together text and contexts were arranged in such a way as to allow the reader a comprehensive view of a Winnebago person in the context of his culture.

This is specifically what is asserted in a hermeneutical position. An understanding of an event in a person's life cannot be divorced from the whole of which it forms a part. The details of social structure, religion and mythology as well as the more personal details of Crashing Thunder's own family relationships, ritual activities, relationships with the spirits and so on, must be incorporated into the life history so that we may come closer to comprehending fully the personal meaning of events and experiences described in the text [44].

Radin provided notes that described the

particular as well as a more general social and cultural context that shaped the interplay between Crashing Thunder and his culture. This helped to establish for Radin the variability of personal experience in Crashing Thunder's life along lines of age, sex, occupation and so on. Such personal contextual annotation, Radin believed, would reveal much of the personal variation and creative expression in a person's life.

This also is part of a hermeneutical process. In other words, it is not enough merely to know the general context of events and experience in a person's life but rather we must also know the more particular ones that give rise to such events. That is, the description of a culture must be done in such a way that we feel we are dealing with real and specific people, with a real and specific tradition [45]. If we cannot do this then it is *we* who end up "giving" (intellectually imposing on) a native person his uniqueness for the sake of arguing some theoretical position and that is something fundamentally different. Radin was always suspicious of what he considered,

> ... to be easily won insights into the most intimate patterns of native behaviour, in the absence of familiarity with the language, long-term fieldwork, and grounding in the lives of specific individuals, as distinct from 'generalized' persons fleshed out from an ethnological skeleton ... [46].

Subsequently, we must realize, as Radin did, that we are dealing,

> ... with specific, not generalized men and women, and with specific, not generalized events. But the recognition of specific men and women should bring with it the realization that there are all types of individuals and that it is not, for instance, a Crow Indian who uttered such and such a prayer, but a particular CrowIndian. It is particularity that is the essence of all history and it is precisely this that ethnology has hitherto balked at doing [47].

Radin [48] defines the life history as a "critical exegesis" the goal of which is to show the geat advantage that accrues to *our* understanding of a native person when he/she is encountered in this way. However, he warns:

> ... first, that it is easy for the ethnologist, lord as he must feel himself of all he surveys, to pursuade himself that he knows more than he actually does, and, second, that of falling into speculation for its own sake [49].

Radin not only adheres to this ethnographic lesson but he also extends it to include what I am calling a contribution to a personal-oriented hermeneutics.

Radin's interests center around an individual as a specific individual. He concerned himself with describing the meaning of Crashing Thunder's experiences and events as they were uniquely integrated with the way he lived his life. When we look at the result of Crashing Thunder's autobiography we still have, "Crashing Thunder the individual". He has not become what usually becomes of persons in the various orthodox ethnographies or in many life histories, a "type". He does not become generic, another standard representation, or reduced to the level of a norm or a deviant of it. Neither does Radin reduce Crashing Thunder's experiences to the level of psychic causation, to the function of id, ego and superego or present it as the outcome of related structural constraints. Instead Radin's "impressionistic description" is a critical interpretation of a specific individual; simultaneously we get a description of the social and cultural contexts in the form of extensive footnoting and in the myths, stories and personal narratives describing the system of Winnebago education, religion, and social organization. Together these texture the composition of the life of an individual in culture.

The same can be said of the description of events in Crashing Thunder's life. They do not become transformed, as events do in the analysis of orthodox ethnographic accounts, into generalized events, nor are they reduced to the level of a *mere* example. There is no attempt to generalize from the level of a person with a unique set of meanings to statements about more general processes or laws, in which

an individual is considered a specific case. Instead, it is through the particular events of Crashing Thunder's life that we get a picture of the vitality of his life experiences. It is at the level of personal impression and description that the meaning of Crashing Thunder's life is explored. In doing so Radin does not overpower Crashing Thunder's life with the imposition of his own theoretical project. Radin also speaks to this issue. He argues that the limitations that are imposed,

> ... as regards the nature and extent of the knowledge furnished [by a theory] are further increased by the circumstances of a nature tending to destroy practically all subjective values associated with the particular ritual, myth, or what not, that is being narrated ... [Instead] personal reminiscences and impressions, inadequate as they are, are likely to throw more light on the workings of the mind and emotions of primitive man than any amount of speculation from a sophisticated ethnologist or ethnological theorist [50].

For Radin, then, life history descriptions are a part of enlarging the field of discourse about the meaning and significance of events in Crashing Thunder's life. Through the life history Radin also has been able to interpret the meaning Crashing Thunder gives to events in terms that we as members of another culture can understand and comprehend.

UNDERSTANDING AND IMAGINATION: THE BASIS OF TEXT AS INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Radin's work is an essential first step to a viable and humanistic anthropology. Diamond argues that,

> One can understand why Paul Radin, alone among the anthropologists of his generation, insisted that the only acceptable ethnology is life history, told by members of an indigenous society themselves. Radin defined this as both the method and the theory of ethnology ... in this perspective he severely criticized the Boas school, especially Mead and Benedict. Radin's view is necessarily incomplete (he himself continued to ask critical questions throughout his career), but what is more pertinent is that his view was exactly the reverse of the *objectifying trend*; he spotted it and tried to combat it early on [51].

Edward Sapir, in his support for life writing inspired and convinced a number of his students of the importance of this kind of work. His interests in life history clearly lie in working out the relationship between the ethnologist and an aesthetic intuition. His clearest statement can be found in a critical commentary that he wrote on a series of North American native "life scapes". These had been gathered together by Elsie Clews Parsons and published in her book *American Indian Life* [52]. Sapir asks some very penetrating questions.

> To what extent can we penetrate into the vitals of primitive life and fashion for ourselves satisfying pictures on its own level of reality? Can the conscious knowledge of the ethnologist be fused with the intuitions of the artist? It is difficult to think oneself into the tacit assumptions of so alien a mode of life as was that of the American Indian tribe. It is not that its patterns are elusive or unintelligible, for they are not, but that the attempt to sink these visible patterns into an atmosphere which is unobtrusive as it is colourful demands an imagination of a peculiarly tolerant kind. Few artists possess so impassioned an indifference to the external form of conduct as to absorb an exotic milieu only to dim its high visibility and to make room for those tracks of the individual consciousness which are the only true concern of literary art [53].

With Radin's accomplishments and Sapir's influence we have firm ground on which to stand into *the art of life writing*. The kind of understanding that is present in life writing as "impressionistic description", as Radin conceived of it, and life writing as an aesthetic endeavour, as Sapir understood it, can be seen as the element that binds the description of an individual's life to an act of imagination on the part of the writer.

The foundation of this kind of understanding is an aesthetic hermeneutics [54]. The elements of this foundation are an insight, acquaintance and mediation between the writer and the native person whose life is being described. It is through this kind of understanding that the life history becomes a work of imaginative description. The kind of understanding that I will be discussing,

> ... is essentially a self-transposition or imaginative projection whereby the knower negates the temporal distance that separates him from his object and becomes contemporaneous with it [55].

It is not a methodological or explanatory reconstruction of a person's life but a mediation or merging with it.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer [56] argues, the basis of the difference between using hermeneutics as a methodological tool for explanation and its use in the pursuit of understanding, is the imagination. If this is acknowledged it means that every case of a writer understanding a native person has to do with bridging the gap between the familiar world in which the writer stands and the meaning of the life experiences and events of the native person. Gadamer specifies that "the real event of understanding goes continually beyond what can be brought to the understanding of the other person's world by methodological effort and critical self-control. It is true of every conversation that through it something different has come to be" [57]. I see the foundation of this "something different" as an aesthetic insight and intimacy through which an act of imagination touches us. It,

> ... is at the same time, in enigmatic fashion, a shattering and a demolition of the familiar. It is not only the 'This art thou! disclosed in a joyous and frightening shock [of understanding]; it also says to us; 'Thou must alter thy life!' [58].

Accordingly, understanding, as so conceived, allows neither the writer nor the native person to stand beyond the interpretive context. Both writer and native person can speak, therefore, of "getting into" or having been "caught" in a dialogue [59]. Basic to this experience is the structuring of the dialogue between the writer and native person in the form of questions which represents an exchange of ideas and actions, both verbal and non-verbal. This means that the endeavour of writing a life history is grounded in an epistemological mediation that takes into consideration this crucial questioning process.

Questioning also takes place within the writer's own critical thinking about ideas, actions and events that make up a native person's life. This as well takes into consideration the character of the questions that are being asked and the mutual confidence between writer and native person that has developed. Hence, the writer's own present situation is already constitutively involved in any process of understanding. His own preunderstandings (preconceptions and presuppositions) do not cut him off from the past, present, or future of the experiences and events that make up the life of the native person he/she is studying. Rather, the writer's own self-reflection, self-criticism and constant questioning of such preunderstanding are the keys that open for interpretation the life of that person. This is the basis of intersubjectivity in interpretation, and it is the beginning of an aesthetic insight into and acquaintance with that other life.

The kind of dialogue I am outlining is characterized above all by an attempt to phrase questions around the events and experiences in a native person's life. This of course is what the writer is constantly trying to do. But authentic questioning results when the writer is provoked enough by the subject matter to question it further in the directions it indicates. This involves a laying open and holding open of possibilities that suspend the presumed finality of both the native person's and the writer's current opinions and feelings.

This approach to a dialogue has as its antithesis scientific investigation and explanation, as ordinarily concerned. Such a scientific mode of investigation is incapable of revealing new questions because it only renders explicit the kinds of questions already implicit in the methods it has available to use [60]. In this way the writer leads, directs and controls the dialogue rather than merging with it. If, on the the other hand, one joins in the interpretive movement, one's position is no longer fash-

ioned as the questioner questioning an object according to the construct of a method which brings the object within one's grasp. On the contrary, the questioner also finds himself/herself the one who is examined along with the other. A scientific method for explanation is only one side of a questioning process. Within a dialectical hermeneutics each person opens him/herself to be questioned by the other.

What is exhibited in this achievement of knowledge is a mediation and a refocusing of the place of the writer and native person within a new and expanded context. This dynamic character of knowledge is at the center of Gadamer's concept of understanding as a "concrete fusion of horizons" [61]. This is not absolute knowledge that Gadamer is speaking of, but the moving dialectical life of knowledge that is expressed in the description of a person's life. This is what takes place in the fusion of horizons. This fusion of horizons, brought about by an interpersonal relationship that is created by the dialogue that ensues, requires the use of creative imagination because, as such, it is the imagination that is the quality that allows for hermeneutical reflection.

What is vitally important in life writing, then, is that the writer must enter into a relationship and acquaint him/herself with the native person in terms of the events that make up that person's life. This makes personal demands upon the ethnographer. Accordingly, he/she must put himself wholly into his practice of self-reflection and crifical questioning so that he/she also confronts himself as a living-thinking person with the native person worked with. Together they encounter the experiences and life events that make up the native person's life. The result is a kind of description of a person's life that is characterized by hermeneutical reflection, through which the final expression in the form of a text engages the reader in the act of reading the life.

UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER

The aesthetics of life description calls upon our powers of insight and empathy. Such an endeavour means that the writer must come to know and understand the other individual. The created image of the other's life is expressed in the description of it and the true aesthetics of this image is found in the writer's ability to see clearly what others may only sense or feel but may not see themselves.

The kind of vision that the writer develops is quite demanding. It consists of a critical self-reflection, an inner positioning and recognition of one's self as a living person, and an insight into the knowledge self-reflection brings to the understanding of another life. Accordingly, the writer cannot stand apart from him/herself to study the reified mind and matter of another's life. For such a step replaces empathy with object, insight with method, imagination with conceptualization and comprehension with explanation. The writer then may be able to formulate a conceptual model and thereby gain an operating, perhaps even manipulative, knowledge of the other's life but will not be able to understand the life from within.

The form of understanding and knowing that I have outlined is characterized by the writer's growing acquaintance with the other's life and with his own. It is an open view that is poetically suggestive and that acknowledges the paralaxes, the mystery of a life. To "defend" ourselves against such a mystery means that we have learned nothing from the life writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and remain caught in the trap of twentieth century objectification (and the political stereotyping and debasement that goes with it) the danger about which Radin, half a century ago, warned us.

NOTES

1 John Dollard, *Criteria for the Life History* (New York: Peter Smith, 1935), pp. 34–35.
2 Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science," in *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology and Sociology,* Bulletin 53, Social Science Research Council (New York, 1945).
3 While it might be generally argued that Dollard and then Kluckhohn were the first to provide concise statements about the use of the life history, this, to some extent, is overstated. Paul Radin in his *Method and Theory of Ethnology: An Essay in Criticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933) supplied anthropology with an even earlier concise statement about the use and interpretation of the life history.
4 Kluckhohn, *op. cit.,* p. 147.
5 *Ibid.,* p. 133.
6 L.L. Langness, *The Life History in Anthropological Science* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965).
7 Cora DuBois, *The People of Alor: The Social-Psychological Study of an East Indian Island* (University of Minnesota Press, 1944); Abram Kardiner, *The Psychological Frontiers of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945).
8 James Spradley, (ed.), *The Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, a Kwakiutl Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); Charles Hughes, "The Life History in Cross-Cultural Psychiatric Research," in Jane Murphy and Alexander Leighton (eds.), *Approaches to Cross-Cultural Psychiatry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 285–328.
9 David Aberle, "The Psychological Analysis of a Hopi Life History," in Robert Hunt (ed.), *Personalities and Cultures* (New York: Natural History Press, 1967), pp. 79–138.
10 Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Random House, 1961); Edward Winter, *Beyond the Mountains of the Moon. The Lives of Four Africans* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1959).
11 Sidney Mintz, *Worker in the Cane: A Puerto Rican Life History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).
12 Kluckhohn, *op. cit.,* Langness, *op. cit.*
13 Lawrence Watson, "The Study of Personality and the Study of Individuals: Two Approaches, Two Types of Explanation," *Ethos,* vol. 6, no. 1 (1978), p. 4.
14 Radin, *op. cit.,* 1933; Melford Spire, "An Overview and a Suggested Reorientation," in Francis Hsu (ed.), *Psychological Anthropology* (Homewood, Ill. : The Dorsey Press, 1961); Lawrence Watson, "Understanding a Life History as a Subjective Document: Hermeneutical and Phenomenological Perspectives," *Ethos,* vol. 4, no. 1 (1976), pp. 95–131.
15 Watson, *op. cit.,* 1976, p. 97.
16 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 102.
18 See, for example, W. Kenneth Little, "Life History and Understanding Personal Meanings," Unpublished M.A. Thesis, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1979.
19 R.B. Braithwaite defines a scientific explanation as that which enables us "to appreciate connections and predict the future" (*Scientific Explanation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 335). Such explanations structure data into the form of a model that should be predictive in the sense that it can answer those certain questions we ask of it.
20 Watson, *op. cit.,* 1978, p. 5.
21 Watson, *op. cit.,* 1976, p. 78.
22 Paul Kendall, *The Art of Biography* (New York: Norton, 1965), p. 122.
23 James Noxon, "Human Nature: General Theory and Individual Lives." Paper presented to the Association for 18th Century Studies, McMaster University, Fall Symposium, 1978, p. 20.
24 c.f. James Clifford, *Biography as an Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962; Kendall, *op. cit.,* Patricia Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).
25 Noxon, *op. cit.,* pp. 1–3.
26 *Ibid.,* p. 2.
27 *Ibid.,* p. 14.
28 *Ibid.,* p. 15.
29 *Ibid.,* p. 3.
30 A.O.J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Collins Press, 1974), pp. 20–21.
31 *Ibid.,* p. 21.
32 See Richard Ellman, *Golden Codgers: Biographical Speculations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
33 Dollard, *op. cit.,* pp. 35–36.
34 Watson, *op. cit.,* 1976, p. 96.
35 Langness, *op. cit.,* p. 8.
36 Kluckhohn, *op. cit.,* p. 87.
37 David Mandelbaum, "The Study of Life History: Gandhi," *Current Anthropology,* vol. 14, no. 3 (1973), p. 178.
38 *Idem.*
39 Dollard, *op. cit.,* p. 260.
40 Paul Radin, *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 2.
41 David Sapir, "Paul Radin, 1883–1959," *Journal of the American Folklore,* vol. 74 (1961), p. 67.
42 Radin, *op. cit.,* 1933, pp. 183–252.
43 D. Sapir, *op. cit.,* p. 60.
44 See Little, *op. cit.;* Watson, *op. cit.,* 1976.
45 Radin, *op. cit.,* 1933, p. 177.
46 Stanley Diamond, "Paul Radin, An Appreciation," in Paul Radin, *The World of Primitive Man* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971), p. xxxi.
47 Radin, *op. cit.,* 1933, pp. 184–185.
48 *Ibid.,* p. 252.
49 *Idem.*
50 Radin, *op. cit.,* 1962, pp. 1–2.
51 Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books – E.P. Dutton, 1974), pp. 428–429.

52 Elsie Clews Parsons, *American Indian Life* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1922). Edward Sapir also had a selection in this book, called "Sayach'spis, a Nootka Indian."
53 Edward Sapir, "A Symposium of the Exotic: Review," *The Dial*, vol. 73 (1922), p. 571.
54 After Gadamer, *op. cit.*
55 David Linge, "Editor's Introduction," in Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.
56 *Ibid.*, p. xxii.
57 Gadamer, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
58 *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.
59 See Kurt Wolff, "Surrender and Community Study: The Study of Loma," in Arthur Vidich, Joseph Bensman and Maurice Stein (eds.), *Reflection on Community Studies* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), pp. 233–263.
60 It is Karl Polanyi's belief (*Science, Faith and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 12) that scientific discovery is also a creative act akin to creation in the arts. He points to a number of different scientists and philosophers of science (including Bronowski, Beneridge, Toulmin, Kuhn, etc.) who likewise show that the framework of scientific theories contain general assumptions which cannot be put directly to an experimental test of truth or falsity. Jacob Bronowski ("The Logic of Mind," in William Coulson and Carl Rogers (eds.), *Man and the Sciences of Man* (Columbus: Charles Merrill Publishers, 1958), p. 37) argues in defense of this position that the birth of scientific invention relies upon an "imaginative shift of vision" something the scientist has intuited rather than deduced. If this is recognized it gives to scientific endeavour the status of being, in most part, an act of creative imagination, something about which few scientists discuss or are readily inclined to admit.
61 Linge, *ibid.*, p. xi.

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