"Damned anecdotes and dangerous confabulations"

Mass-Observation as life history

> In the process of the construction of many kinds of texts, spoken or written, the memories of the past are in constant play, flashing beneath this still surface like gleaming fish in a still lake...Narrative...is about desire and seduction. And autobiography permeates the seductive strategies of ordinary people. They are always at it with their damned anecdotes and what an impatient nineteenth century judge once called their "dangerous confabulations". (Rosen 1993:154)

1 Introduction

In 1992, Brian Street and I commenced an investigation into the writing practices of the present-day contributors to the Mass-Observation Archive. Using the Mass-Observers' own writing, including their reflexive accounts about the writing process, and complementing this data with a small number of in-depth interviews, we explored the social nature of writing. As self-defined non-professional writers, the Mass-Observers offered us access to the kinds of writing and reading which take place outside the formal confines of work and school and furnished us with detailed evidence of the ways in which literacy practices are embedded in everyday life. The aim of this research was to examine these practices and the conceptions of literacy that inform and give meaning to them and to relate research with a specific empirical base to the wider theoretical debate about literacy with which Street and others have been concerned for some time. (Heath 1983, Street 1984; 1993 & 1995, Barton & Ivanic 1991).

Our report on this investigation (Street & Sheridan 1994) was submitted to the Economic and Social Research Council and was subsequently read by several rapporteurs who had been invited to evaluate the research. Overall, the evaluations were positive, but one of the rapporteurs concluded that those shortcomings he or she had identified in the report had arisen because "there is really not a great deal that can be said about the materials collected for the archive. They do, no doubt, contain much fascinating detail which could make for entertaining reading, but they are not demonstrably representative of society at large, and hence cannot really support quantitative or graphical summaries which make any claims beyond the documentation of the characteristics of the sample."

2 The problem of representativeness

I want, in this paper, to address this verdict on Mass-Observation which I interpret as not only a critique of our specific research on literacy but also, more broadly, as an indictment of the entire contemporary project. I want to argue that there *is* in fact a great deal to be said about the collection and that it provides considerable scope for *qualitative* research on everyday contemporary life in Britain. It is of course crucial to acknowledge that the material has been derived from a statistically unrepresentative sample of the population. An integral part of the ESRC research was to elucidate the specific characteristics of this group, not only in terms of the socio-economic background of the people who contribute, but also in terms of the motivations and interests which led them to participate in Mass-Observation. This was done in order to establish the grounds for a case study approach in contrast to the quantitative and graphical perspective proffered by the ESRC rapporteur. The choice of a case study approach in our literacy research derived from an appreciation that the Mass-Observation material required a methodology which took account of its particular strengths and weaknesses.

However, it is important to consider the issue of representativeness raised by the ESRC rapporteur. Discomfort with the use of self-selected groups is prevalent not only within academic circles, but also in the wider community where there seems to be a common popular belief about what constitutes "proper" or scientific social research. Historians are less troubled than other groups by this problem, perhaps because they have more experience in working with batches of documents (for example, letters, diaries, notebooks) which have survived over time. For the historian such material is a delight and a challenge because it may be all we have left of a particular life and time: a crucial part of the scholarly task is to establish the relationship between what has survived and its historical moment, that is, how "representative" can we take it to be and of what.

One conclusion I have drawn from participating in many discussions on the subject is that the anxiety elicited by the "unrepresentativeness" of the Mass-Observation group seems to be related in part to its size. There are currently over 500 people actively involved in making contributions, and over 2,500 people have taken part since the inception of this phase of work in 1981. The involvement of hundreds of people tends to be associated with sample surveys and opinion research on a grand scale. Had we been tracking a small group of people, say 20 or 30, in depth over the same fourteen years, it is unlikely that the same issue of representativeness would be raised, at least not with the same level of concern and insistence. A further factor is the widespread distrust about what might be described as "non-élite" material; that is, material generated by people who are not chosen by experts but who, on the contrary, choose to elect themselves as spokespersons or social commentators of our times by contributing to the Mass-Observation Archive. In this sense, the Mass-Observers *are* "representatives" of their social groups (for further discussions on the meanings of "representing" see Sheridan 1993a). Is the story they are telling the "right" story, and are they entitled to tell it? Or should we fear their so-called anecdotal quality and, like the nineteenth century judge quoted by Rosen (above), the *danger* of their "confabulations"? Such concerns face all those working in the area of autobiography and life history.

3 Shifting the paradigm: Mass-Observation as life history research

The nature and provenance of Mass-Observation material calls for a research paradigm which draws on the traditions, not of social surveys and the use of representative samples (although that is still arguably possible), but on the tradition of life history work: oral history, life story projects and competitions, community writing and the plethora of ethnographic and participatory research which has been conducted both within and beyond academic contexts. It is necessary to reject the commonly expressed metaphorical understanding of the Mass-Observation Archive as some kind of historical "treasure trove" or databank which can be dipped into, or excavated, for colourful illustrations in a simple, unproblematic fashion. That characterisation of the collection constructs it as fixed, de-contextualised, finalised and removed from the social activities which brought it into existence. In reality, the collection is much more organic: constantly changing and growing; it is imbued with the meanings and aspirations of both its guardians and its creators, and it embodies within its texts the processes of its own production. Reading the texts requires an engagement with these processes as well as a grasp of the content and the material form (see Bloome, Sheridan & Street 1993). Our claims for the material depend upon our integrating an understanding of its provenance with the selection of an analytical approach which can generate theory and contribute to our understanding of social life without recourse to crude generalisations about the population based on non-typical data. Part of this process lies in locating the Mass-Observation project, and the resulting material, within the tradition of life history work and in drawing on the methodologies of these traditions.

This re-conceptualisation of the Mass-Observation writing calls for the application of modes of analysis very different from those used in approaching sample surveys. In the words of one oral historian, the use of auto/biographical and life story materials in social research demands that "we must project ourselves...beyond the framework of classical epistemology" (Ferrotti 1981). Within this framework, statistical "representativeness" becomes less important as a factor than the capacity of the data to reveal a more in-depth understanding of social process and social meanings. The case study approach becomes one of the most appropriate methods of analysis with its capacity for generating an understanding the "how" and "why" questions in research rather than the "who", "when" and "where" questions. In his discussion of the case history method, Robert K. Yin (1989)

claims that it retains "the holistic and meanful characteristics of real-life events" and allows for links and connections to be traced over time.

> Case studies...are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study...does not represent a "sample", and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisations) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation). (1989:21).

Oral historians have been using this approach for some time. In relation to his oral history on political behaviour and opinion, Daniel Bertaux has written:

> We may say that our sample is representative, not at the morphological level, (at the level of superficial description) but at the sociological level, at the level of socio-structural relations. These two levels should not be confused. If, for instance, one wants to know how a given population is going to vote in the next general election, the first field is the right one, but if one wants to understand the practice of voting and choosing for whom to vote...then it is the second level which is relevant. (1981: 37-38)

> His words are echoed by Nick Stanley commenting on the strengths of the material produced by the early Mass-Observation volunteer panel and referring to Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description":

> This is not an argument about the representativeness of the data as a true profile of the general population. In one respect, even if the sample, on inspection proved highly skewed, it might yet provide useful information about this particular population...the point is further supported by a second line of argument which maintains that the panel material gives...a "thickness" of data precisely because it is not confined by the normal narrowness of the printed questionnaire. (1981: 149)

I have referred to the "tradition of life history work" as if it were a homogenous and well-established phenomenon. It isn't, and in some areas there are debates about the differences and similarities between, for example, the history, priorities and practice of oral history (Bornat 1995), and the relatively recent arrival, primarily within feminism, literature and sociology, of the study of "auto/biography" (Stanley 1993). The part played by life histories in social research can be traced back to the work of Florian Znaniecki and his collection of life stories and letters written by Polish peasants and workers in the early years of the twentieth century (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958). His approach was significant in the establishment of the Chicago School of Sociology in the USA with its emphasis both on participant observation and on the use of life story material such as autobiographies, interviews, diaries and letters (Plummer 1983). There has been a recent renewal of activity, prompted by interdisciplinary interest in narrative and representations of the self, which suggests that the whole field is in a state of coalescence and re-definition. The process of situating the Mass-Observation project therefore demands an active re-working of life history work arguing not so much for what it *is*, but for what it could be. The incorporation of Mass-Observation material into this field in itself demands a broadening of the term "life history" as it is generally understood: that is, with an emphasis on the "whole life" told retrospectively either in written form or as oral testimony in contrast to the more fragmented and

contemporaneous quality of Mass-Observation writing. This methodological and theoretical shift is one of the contributions of the research project on Mass-Observation under consideration here.

This process of critically re-working has been necessary for some time in the management and promotion of the Mass-Observation project. Much additional productive talking and thinking has occurred in the creation of a Life History Work course which I developed jointly with the oral historian, Alistair Thomson, at the University of Sussex Centre for Continuing Education. This course is an explicit attempt to synthesise the developments in different areas of life history work in order to move beyond teaching the technicalities of, for example, conducting a good interview, or of developing archival skills. We set out to draw on a wider theoretical literature (much of it, as Harold Rosen has wryly observed, evolving as if in isolation within separate academic disciplines, (Rosen 1993) which addresses issues about memory, about the construction of identity through narrative, about the relationship between individual and collective story telling, about representations of life in text and about the meanings and purposes of recounting a life. We draw on a wide variety of life history practices, seeking to identify within them a commonality of approach and a guide to best practice. A key aim of the course is to offer an opportunity to those who are already active in life history work, or who soon plan to be, to reflect upon their own experiences by focusing on power relations between the interviewer/interviewee, the researcher/researched, and about the different kinds of knowledge generated by different research methodologies. Fundamental to our approach in the course is the priority given not only to encompassing the kind of oral history and research with written life documents which occur within the academic context, but also to learn from and integrate lessons from community activities: writing groups, local history, and the work of those involved in advocacy and reminiscence groups in therapeutic and practitioner settings.

Our work at Sussex is both a product of, and a contribution to, the burgeoning international interest in life history work. There have been numerous special issue journals on autobiography and life stories (including *Sociology*, *Gender and History*, *Women's Studies International Forum*), and new publications dedicated to the study of life stories including *The Narrative Study of Lives*, now in its third annual volume and the *Journal of Narrative and Life History.* New groups have been founded including the Auto/biography group of the British Sociological Association and, in France, under the leadership of Philippe Lejeune, an organisation devoted to the study and production of autobiographical stories. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, there has been a revival of interest in life history methodology in Eastern Europe and in the countries of the former USSR (Sheridan 1991 and Sheridan & Perks 1995). The contribution of feminism to oral history (cf Gluck & Patai, 1991), to auto/biography (Stanley 1992), to anthropology (Okely & Calloway 1992) and to sociolinguistics (Cameron et al 1992) forefronts questions of power and the combinations of gender, age, class, ethnicity and education which are relevant to all forms of life history work. The established British journal for oral historians, *Oral History*, has been covering many of these issues for some time (see particularly "The Memory and History debates: some international perspectives", Thomson, Frisch & Hamilton, 1994). There has also been renewed interest in the results of life story competitions, with the first national award scheme being held in Britain in 1994 under the auspices of the National Life Story Collection at the British Library, and investigations and comparisons between much more long-standing competitions in Europe (see, for example, Bohman 1986 and Gullestad & Almas 1992).

4 Claims for life history research

What follows is an attempt to delineate some of the dominant themes or strands which characterise contemporary life history work, and against which I want to examine the Mass-Observation project. One particularly useful source has been a paper by Hatch and Wisniewski, of the University of Tennessee, in *Life History and Narrative* (1995). They canvassed the views of 79 "narrative and life history scholars" drawn from the database of the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education.* There was considerable diversity among the responses and, not surprisingly, a number of unanswered questions, but there were also some general areas of agreement which mesh with my own experience in teaching the Life History course and working in the Mass-Observation Archive. A recurring claim by most life history practitioners is that life history work - theory and practice - possesses the capacity to generate new ways of knowing about social life, and that this knowledge can be utilised in effecting social change. A commitment to practical activity and to the transformative potential of creating your own history and/or that of your community has been central to the development of much oral

history, and even more so to the activities of community writing/history groups of the kind that make up the Federation of Worker Writer and Community Publishers (see Mace 1995). Paul Thompson, a founding member of the Oral History Society in Britain, made such a claim for oral history:

> ...oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of enquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and the writing of history - whether in books, or museums, or radio and film - it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place. (Thompson 1988: 2).

His words are echoed by another oral historian, Joanna Bornat, who compares oral history as defined by Michael Frisch (1990:188) with the study of auto/biography as defined by Liz Stanley, (1994:89). The purpose of Bornat's paper (Bornat 1995) is to delineate *differences* between the two traditions, notably the commitment of oral historians to social change, with their mission to uncover the lost or hidden histories of oppressed or marginalised peoples, in contrast to the more academic approach of auto/biography which she argues limits research to the text and emphasises the development of theory. While accepting that Bornat is right in her historical account of much of the oral history tradition, I would want to argue for the potentiality and necessity of imbuing *all* life history work (whether oral testimony or written accounts) with the political instrumentality which she sees as currently evident only in oral history. In this sense, work on the Mass-Observation material has already demonstrated some of ways in which the two traditions may be combined. For example, the dialogue between the life story narrator and the listener/researcher which Bornat argues is distinctive and valuable in oral history can also be identified in the *written* correspondence of the Mass-Observers with the Archive. The areas of overlap which she describes suggest a degree of congruence upon which we can build:

> There is a shared interest in knowledge and how it is constructed with references to "epistemologically-oriented" (Stanley) and "the nature of the process of historical memory" (Frisch). They allow for the manufacture of reality, by problematising the nature of arrived-at accounts, with reference to "how people make sense of the past" and "political production". Each defines itself in terms of both method *and* content. They connect with notions of reflexivity, referencing the inter-relations of self and other and the role the past plays in the personal exploration of life experience; each suggesting a central role for the individual in the process of understanding accounts. Finally they both acknowledge the possibilities of merging categories: the individual and the social, the past and the present, fact and fiction, writing and reading. (Bornat 1995: 18)

These sentiments are echoed in the retort which one of Hatch and Wisniewski's respondents made when asked to differentiate between "narrative" and "life history":

> Both approaches to inquiry are unabashedly genre-blurring. They tear down walls - anthropology, sociology, history, linguistics - and why should we resurrect them? Each relies on story, on subjective accounts, on meaning as it is constructed by people in situations. Each focuses on life as it is lived - an experience not easily fitted into disciplines, categories or compartments. Each assumes a dynamic, living past, a past open to interpretation and reinterpretation to meaning-making in and for the present. (Bill Ayers quoted in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995:114).

5 Research relationships: the question of power

Life history work, then, is distinctive because it focuses upon the individual, and is rooted in the sense-making systems of that individual, but nevertheless seeks to contextualise the individual within the social and cultural world. The danger of romanticising the individual must be countered by according the appropriate weight to historical and political perspectives. In this sense both the narrator of the life story and the reader/interviewer engage in a dialectical process which weaves self and the social world together. This interest in the relationship between the life story narrator and his or her audience (reader or listener) is another key element which distinguishes life story work from research where, in the interests of objectivity, the researcher is rendered invisible. The Hatch and Wisniewski respondents offer a range of observations - from fears about the intrusive nature of the research (too personal, demanding too much self-disclosure from the narrator) to arguments for the development of what one respondent calls "intersubjectivity", the close identification of the teller and the "re-teller" or interpreter of the story. What emerges is an emphasis on the research relationship which offers opportunities for developing collaborative modes of engagement, and which is much more likely to create knowledge that has a significance and meaning not only to the researcher but also to the life story teller.

An over-emphasis on the egalitarian or collaborative potential of life history work, however, risks ignoring the real power differences that exist between the researcher (interviewer, reader and researcher) and the life story narrator or subject of research. Issues of control, ownership and voice are critical. The Hatch and Wisniewski respondents raise several questions which remain unanswered. "Who speaks for whom and with what kind of authority? Whose story is it? Who owns the product of the work? Who is the author? What does the researcher gain from the research? The subject?" (p.119). Foucault has argued in his early work that the tendency of modern man (sic) to confess renders him amenable to increased social and political control (1981:174). The technologies of power, he argues, are "discipline" (of which "examination" and within that forms of social research are located), and "confession". In a useful summary of Foucault's ideas in this area, Norman Fairclough writes:

> ...examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a "case": a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power...If examination is the technique of objectifying people, confession is the technique of subjectifying them... The compulsion to delve into and talk about oneself, and especially one's sexuality...appears on the face of it to be a liberating resistance of bio-power. Foucault, however, believes that this is an illusion: confession draws more of a person into the domain of power...the very act of doing it changes the person who does it; it 'exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; unburdens him of his wrongs and liberates him and promises him salvation'.(Fairclough 1992:52-4)

The question of power differences in social research preoccupies most life history practitioners, but there is a need to balance the concern about exploitation against the value and rewards (to the life story tellers as well as to the researchers) of doing the research in the first place. Too great a sensitivity about exploitation will paralyse the whole enterprise. As Fairclough goes on to point out, a view of power which remains too fixed serves to overlook the capacities of people to subvert and contest hegemonic practices. Life history work, especially, challenges the idea that there is only one kind of history, or social knowledge, and only certain sorts of people are entitled to create it. In this sense, life history work has the potential to be transformative for both the life story narrators and the researchers, and for the disciplines from which they derive. There is a useful discussion about the problem of power in research relationships by Deborah Cameron, and her colleagues in sociolinguistics, in their introduction to *Researching Language* (Cameron et al 1992: 1-28). They consider the term "empowering research" which they see as "research *on, for and with*". They examine their own research practices against three formulations: (1) "Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects", (2) "Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them", and (3) "If knowledge is worth

having, it is worth sharing". Of special value is their distinction between the empowering potential of *representing* subjects (in a published text such as a book or film), and the empowering potential of the *process* of research which is interactive. It is this interactive process which is relatively easy to identify in oral history, but which I want to argue later is also present in Mass-Observation.

6 Looking back at "old" Mass-Observation: continuities and discontinuities

Before moving on to consider how the contemporary Mass-Observation project can be construed as life history work, I want to look briefly at the Mass-Observation of the 1930s and 40s. The reputation and history of the original initiative are not only of interest in themselves, but also provide the historical framework within which the present-day project was conceived and is now understood. Two strands in particular can be identified in the early work which are characteristic of life history work: first, the contestation of traditional academic boundaries in order to draw on insights in different areas of both theoretical and empirical work; secondly, an engagement with social change or political instrumentality which involves a recognition of the power relations involved in narrating a life - for both the narrator and the listener/reader/researcher.

From its inception, Mass-Observation straddled traditions and academic disciplines. In his thesis on the organisation's first three years, 1937-40, Nick Stanley (1981) devotes considerable space to the consideration of Mass-Observation in its relations to contemporary sociology, social anthropology, photo-journalism, the documentary film movement, and surrealism. The influence of the Chicago School of Sociology with its emphasis both on participant observation and on the use of life story material (autobiography, interviews, diaries and letters) is evident in a range of early Mass-Observation studies, that had not only inspired an ethnographic approach to the study of the town of Bolton in Lancashire in 1937, but also most certainly inspired the establishment of a panel of writers who were not sociologists but who, in Mass-Observation's terms, were "untrained cameras" who tell us "not what the world is like, but what it looks like to them" (Mass-Observation, 1938:66). Mass-Observation declared itself to be a new form of social science which challenged accepted moral and political power relations and which set out to ascertain the real "facts" about everyday life. Nor was it content simply to amass evidence. There was a high priority placed on a rapid turn-around of the information in order to publish books, newspaper articles and pamphlets with the intention not only of influencing politicians and policy makers but also of sharing this information with the very same people who had helped them in the first place (cf Cameron et al's formulation of "researching for"). In 1939 the founding Mass-Observers wrote:

> One thing we can be fairly sure of, namely that most readers of this book want to know [the] facts...which will help them play their full part in the world... Fact is urgent - we are cogs in a vast and complicated machine which may turn out to be an infernal machine that is going to blow us all to smithereens. In any case life is short, and if we are at all interested in this world...we had better hurry up and learn where we stand. We must have knowledge, at least sufficient for us to come to personal decisions. (*Britain* by Mass-Observation 1939:8)

Their early publications contain much polemical use of terms like "fact" and "truth", but this should not be seen to obscure a more substantial interest in the nature and significance of the approaches to the information they were developing. As Janet Finch, in her evaluation of the wartime research on the evacuation schemes for children, comments:

> (Mass-Observation had an) approach to data-creation which goes beyond concepts of unproblematic fact-gathering: there is a more explicit recognition of the process of research

> as a political activity in the broadest sense, and the knowledge thereby created as intrinsically political. (Finch 1986:94).

The partisan nature of Mass-Observation's early publicity resulted, not surprisingly, in the recruitment of contributors who while describing themselves as ordinary would also want to be seen as enlightened and progressive, "interested in science", concerned with the "truth" (see reasons given for joining Mass-Observation in *Wartime Women,* Sheridan, 1990). The Mass-Observation assertion that you did not need to be an expert in order to take part in the study of society, or in writing your own history, prefigured the claims of the much more recent radical social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, including black activism and feminism. The fact that this led to the establishment of a panel of contributors who were not statistically representative of the population is not surprising. What it did produce was a "community" of writers (nearly 2,500 people replied to Mass-Observation's monthly directives between 1937 and 1945 and about 500 kept a daily diary during the same period) who identified with the whole idea of "doing" Mass-Observation and who felt themselves to be in some sense participatory in the research itself, even though they did not know each other, or the organisers of Mass-Observation, personally. This special relationship - the sense of affinity and even of ownership - which is evident to an even greater extent in the contemporary project - distinguishes Mass-Observation from most other social research.

7 Participatory research and being "ordinary"

One explanation for the writers' strong sense of identification with the Mass-Observation project is the emphasis placed on the role of ordinary people in narrating their own lives. It is this key attribute which Mass-Observation shares with oral history, life story competitions and other older forms of life history materials, and the cornerstone for my claim that Mass-Observation should be considered as a form of life history. The requests for volunteers have always called for the views and experiences of people who might otherwise not have the opportunity to go on record in this particular way. In his first letter to the press, David Pocock (instigator and director of the new phase of Mass-Observation between 1981 and 1990) wrote that taking part in Mass-Observation required a willingness to write "both about personal experience and things seen and heard in daily life. The experience of 'ordinary people' is of particular interest". The term "ordinary" has recurred frequently both in press coverage of the project (see, for example, the headline in the *Sunday Times*, 15.8.82, "Ordinary People") and in the ways in which many of the Mass-Observation correspondents describe themselves and the role of the project. In one of the interviews we conducted in 1993 as part of the research on literacy practices, a Mass-Observer who had joined the project in 1986 said:

> I don't think ordinary people get the same chance as many academics, or so-called educated people, and people in the media, to have their say...I don't think anybody is really ordinary, but when I started writing for the project, David Pocock, who was then in charge of it, put in a newspaper that he wanted people who were as ordinary as possible! And I thought, well I am fairly ordinary...you think of yourself as someone who hasn't perhaps achieved fame or great success, just sort of normal, everyday life, going to work, and your family. [M1498]

In response to a question asked two years earlier on the value of Mass-Observation, the same sort of answers were common:

Mass-Observation is valuable in giving an accurate view of what ordinary people rather than the professional media think about events. [P2250, Spring 1991, part 3]

..ordinary people are not blind slaves but can project a knowledge of the world in 'good sense' terms, hence possess the potential to change it. [R1671]

[we are] ordinary people, with all our prejudices, people of our own time and culture, seen from our own point of view, the very real stuff of history. [E174]

The meanings of the term "ordinary" are complex, and have been the basis for other discussions about Mass-Observation (Barton et al 1993, Bloome et al 1995), but for the moment I simply want to argue that its frequent appearance in different Mass-Observation texts demonstrates the existence of an assumption which is shared by both the people who write for the Mass-Observation project, the "correspondents", and the people who solicit and then store the writing, (Pocock, myself, my colleagues in the Archive): Mass-Observation is about everyday life, involving people who would not otherwise be writing in precisely this way for the benefit of not only future historians, but also for people "like them" who are interested to learn about life in Britain in the 1980s or 1990s. Calling themselves "ordinary" signifies *what they are not*, at least within their identities as Mass-Observers; they are not academics, politicians, policy makers, published writers, professional historians, journalists, controllers of the media and other spokespersons - people who have certain sorts of power to define what history is. In this sense, the Mass-Observation project sits easily with other life history endeavours: oral history and community writing especially. There is even a shared and usually implicit assumption, expressed by R1671, one of the Mass-Observers quoted above, that doing this kind of writing, and amassing this kind of experiential information as a public archive can change things, that is, it can be politically instrumental, or to return to Cameron et al's phrase, "empowering". What cannot be assumed to be shared, however, is exactly *what kinds* of writing make this possible, and precisely *how* it can be used to change things. We may talk of life history work being empowering, but empowering for what? What are the mechanisms for change in relation to a community of writers who for the most part never meet, and share a purely symbolic identity? Much shared speaking out ("finding a voice") by people who have been oppressed or marginalised has occurred in collective situations, where the production of oral and written life stories is part of a wider political struggle for identity and power.

8 Making use of Mass-Observation

The present-day Mass-Observation project cannot claim the same kind of direct agency in the political arena claimed by the early Mass-Observers but it is fruitful to consider in what ways taking part in the project can be used to further the correspondents' own interests. Since 1990, a number of questions have been included in different directives which invite the writers to comment on the project itself and their own participation in it. For example, the Spring 1991 Directive which Brian Street and I designed for the literacy research, included twelve questions on the writing process. In addition to responding to direct requests for views on the project, most of the writers incorporate spontaneous comments into their replies on other subjects, or, especially if they have queries or complaints, into accompanying letters. At any point in time, I am engaged in dialogue with one or other Mass-Observer about the nature of their participation in the project. This includes discussions about how much or how little they write, the way they treat the subject matter, their views on the nature and appropriateness of what they are being asked to write about, the "quality" of their writing, the way it fits or

doesn't fit with the rest of their life, especially if they have been busy or unwell. We also deal with points of principle: ownership and use of the material, copyright, privacy and rights. It is possible, from these correspondences, as well as from the directive replies themselves, to explore the ways in which people understand and make use of the project for their own purposes.

There are many common themes to be found in the reasons people give for taking part in Mass-Observation and, as in any relationship, the rewards and meanings may shift over time. They talk of enjoying the writing and feeling it is helping them to develop their writing and thinking skills. They use the directive questions to stimulate their ideas, and sometimes to initiate discussions with other people or to convey information to other people who read what they write in reply to directives. Some of the older people talk of the directives keeping them alert and up-to-date with current events. Many people speak of sorting out their ideas, of planning their lives in the future, even of finding out what they feel. Mass-Observers who do other writing use the directive replies as a spring board or "resource bag" for their other creative activities.

9 Writing to a university archive

It is clear that the link between the Mass-Observation project and an educational institution is significant. For those people who see universities as progressive and influential places (and for some Mass-Observers the University of Sussex still evokes memories of the radicalism of the 1960s), the Archive's home at the University is an incentive to join. Ensuring that their ideas and experiences are making a contribution to enlightened research is appealing and rewarding, even if the link to politics and policy changes is indirect. Indeed, for one woman in her 80s, simply being able to boast to her bossy social worker that she "did work for Sussex University" was in a small way "empowering" for her. Another example of the uses of Mass-Observation was sent to the Archive by a Mass-Observer who had taken a stand on not paying the Community Charge (Poll Tax). The account she sent to us was unsolicited, that is, it was not a reply to a directive, but a piece of writing done on her own initiative to record formally her experience at court when she was charged with non-payment.

> When it was my turn I took an Affirmation rather than an oath on the Bible, and was asked the first two questions, had I paid in full -no and did I have a defence as listed in the instructions to which I said 'No, I am here as an Act of Civil Disobedience in protest at this regressive tax and it will be recorded for History to judge". The Magistrate laughed and said 'So you are going down in history'. I said 'Yes, my grandchildren will read about this' (The magistrate) said 'I have no alternative but to grant liability order, unfortunately the reporter has just left so you won't be in the newspapers'. [W632]

The magistrate mocks Mrs W and assumes that the only kind of recording for history that would be accessible to her would be a piece by the newspaper reporter (the magistrate controlling all the formal recording in the legal context). For Mrs W, the fact that she is planning to place her version of the whole experience in a public archive constitutes a way of restacking the power balance between her and the magistrate. We might even speculate that knowing that she had this secret extra string to her bow helped the redoubtable Mrs W be that much more redoubtable in the situation! (For fuller discussions of this particular account and some of the readings and interpretations of it, see Bloome et al 1995).

The following extract from a letter by Mrs A announcing her withdrawal from the project demonstrates that taking part in Mass-Observation can be a kind of stepping stone for other work. She sees Mass-Observation as useful, but in the end limited:

> I am not going to respond to the Spring Directive. And in view of the Criminal Justice Act in the Autumn, an attack on civil liberties is an echo of the Nazi Enabling Bill of 1933, I have decided to stop writing for Mass-Observation until such time as there is some improvement in the social predicament of millions of my country men, women and children, who are being done to death, abused, hounded and made miserable by our appallingly stupid government...I have decided to invest any energy I have into trying to change what is being visited upon us. The luxury of sitting quietly to reflect and then respond to your so-interesting directives will take me from the task ahead. I regret this but I am going to break free in the sure knowledge that the material will continue to flood in...M-O has helped me find a writer's voice...See what you have done! *Muchas gracias*, and may good fortune attend your continuing existence and future publications [A1530, letter to DS, August 1994].

The other consequence of being based in an institution, particularly when it is called an "archive", is the promise that the writing will receive the same care and research interest that other important archived historical documents receive, and that it will ensure the survival of the writing for the future. When asked what they got out of writing for Mass-Observation, most of the correspondents cited the promise of posterity as one of the rewards. One woman said in an interview:

> When I die I want to leave things. I don't want to just pop my clogs and they'll say well there she goes, cheerio, good-bye. I want them to say, well she wrote a book, she did this writing for Mass-Observation, she knitted me a lovely bedspread, things like that you know. I won't be able to leave any cooking behind will I? But you know, I'd like to think there's going to be a lot of me left really" [F1373]

But even for those people who are attracted by the academic associations, motivations may be mixed. On the one hand, the project may be seen as more independent or "pure" by being protected from the contaminating world of commerce, competition and money. On the other hand, academia may be seen as remote and out of touch. Their task, then, is to ensure that the collective record to which they contribute *is* worldly and *does* contain the languages and meanings of everyday life, whether that's from the world of an office, a prison, an oil rig or a school. This same view of the project may explain why some people do NOT volunteer for Mass-Observation. The university setting acts as a deterrent either because they are alienated from mainstream education (and many people have good reason to be so), or because they see a university and all it entails - social research, history, archives - at best as an irrelevance and at worst a bastion of élitism and conservatism. Even those people who volunteer to write, and enjoy doing so, are conscious of the privilege of a university both in terms of what it represents about social class and in terms of its geographical situation in the relatively more affluent south of England. For many people, the Mass-Observation project will never hold much attraction, unless we were able to mount very specific and probably face-to-face recruitment drives which link closely with the appropriate community and grassroots organisations. We know from other research (Barton & Ivanic 1991 and Street 1993), that writers take up specific social roles and identities in different cultural contexts. In households, in workplaces, in communities, different people do different kinds of writing. Women in this society are more likely to be family "archivists", to maintain social and family networks through personal letters, to keep all kinds of journals and diaries, and are skilled at precisely this kind of writing. This helps explain why Mass-Observation is more likely to appeal to them, rather than to men, because it builds on, and even legitimates and extends, their existing practices. It was very clear from our research on literacy practices that unless taking part in Mass-Observation was congruent with people's understandings of literacy, they were

unlikely to see the relevance or value of the activity for them. For this reason, it would be impossible to "impose" a Mass-Observation-style project on categories of people just because these categories are under-represented in the Mass-Observation panel - a factor which obviously has crucial implications for any attempts to make the Mass-Observation panel statistically representative of the whole population.

10 "Directive replies" as layered life stories

It is legitimate to ask, however, whether responding to thematic directives can be construed as "writing a life story" Some replies are little more than a few lines long with none of the reflexivity or personal investment which is usually associated with life story telling. Others, however, may be very detailed and revealing indeed; the length and depth of people's responses vary enormously. The form of reply shifts in relation to the ways in which the writers see the task they are performing; they draw from and re-work ways of writing from a repertoire of genres which are familiar to them and which they consider to be appropriate. Just as the reply to one directive may contain many different elements, so the replies over time represent shifts in the life course, and changes in the way people think and feel, and the way they choose to record those changes. It is useful to see the "chunks" of writing as many-layered life stories, told at different times and from different points of view. The same writers may find themselves recounting their childhood in slightly (or significantly) different ways when replying to a directive in 1984 on family and relations, in 1991 to one on educational experience and to the two sent out in 1993, one what they know about their birth and the other on their memories of childhood generally. As long as the themes of the directives do not become too repetitive, the writers seem to enjoy this opportunity for re-writing their accounts. It means that no single version has to be the last word, as if they were sending off an autobiography which was weighed down with the responsibility of being the definitive version of their lives, and for which, once sent away, could not be re-written. On the contrary, it is common for Mass-Observation correspondents to send in afterthoughts, sometimes months after their original piece was received. The accounts lack the aspired-to "wholeness" of much autobiography or even of most oral historical testimonies, but there is a different, more nuanced kind of totality in the picture which emerges of each person who writes (discussed in an earlier paper, Sheridan 1993b). There is no doubt that the resulting material constitutes life history material, rich in detail, diachronic, *not representative of the population*, but encompassing a very wide range of lives and, like most other life story data providing insights into the subjective experiences of people through their own narration.

11 The suspicion of "Autobiography"

By describing the Mass-Observation writing as life story material, however, I would want to differentiate it from the popular understandings of "autobiography". While we may speak of the writings being "autobiographical" because they are written about self and with the self as the central focus, they do not constitute precisely autobiographies in any narrowly defined, culturally specific, sense (see Sheridan 1993b). The Mass-Observers themselves are very clear on this matter. In the Spring 1994 Directive, in a section on diaries and autobiographies, I asked the correspondents if they had ever written an autobiography. Many of their replies revealed a high level of criticism of what Philippe Lejeune has called the "autobiographical impulse". They expressed a suspicion that most autobiographies were "untruthful". One writer described them as "usually written by the vain and pompous" [W2174]. Others felt that their own lives were too unexceptional to write about. [S2191]: "I do not feel I have anything worth inflicting on readers"; [S2662]: "I have never considered my life interesting enough to expect other people to read it", and [W1398]: "Who on earth would be interested in it apart from Mass-Observation?". It is worth bearing in mind that most of these writers send in large batches of their writing three times a year to the Archive and some have been doing it regularly for 14 years! Those who had attempted to set down their life story had only modest aspirations and spoke of wanting to leave something more like a family history than an autobiography for their grandchildren.

It was clear from the hesitancy of the replies to the question "Do you think of writing for Mass-Observation as autobiography?" that most people had not really considered their contributions as a form of autobiography and while most of them conceded that perhaps all their accumulated directive replies might amount to something approaching an autobiography, this wouldn't have been their own way of describing what taking part in Mass-Observation meant to them:

> ...a bit like autobiography but I find it more like journalism. Although I'm writing about myself, it's not so much my past, more about my opinions. If I were asked to write my a/b, I'd probably not want to because of the time element and also I'd find it a bit boring. [R2718]

> Over the past few years I have been writing for Mass-Observation, it is quite possible that a 'chunk' of my life has already been 'listed' but perhaps not in the detail that would be needed if I were to write a book. [D2051]

> A lot of the replies to Mass-Observation directives could be classed as chapters of autobiography In addition to the opening pen portrait, there have been numerous occasions over the past 12 years when contributions have an autobiographical content (e.g. Early Retirement, Birth) [S516].

> Mass-Observation is a form of writing autobiography as the subjects you set us call for opinions but also memories and experiences [S2662]

There is general agreement about what "doing Mass-Observation" is, but less agreement on whether this could be defined as autobiography. Much of this uncertainty relates to the understanding of auto/biography as a popular genre: chronological - birth until old age, "whole" life story, told with hindsight, designed for publication and generally associated with the lives of famous and wealthy people - politicians, film stars, sports personalities and so on. In contrast, the writing for Mass-Observation is subject-driven rather than chronological: it explicitly embodies opinions and feelings as well as being about "what actually happened" and, importantly, since many people raise it as a crucial distinction, it is anonymous. The opportunity to tell and re-tell "chapters" of life stories or "scenes" from a life, to keep bringing the reader up-to-date with the latest account of what is going on in one's life, facilitates the accumulation of a composite picture, and one which can be constantly amended. The resulting composition is unlikely to possess the integrity or internal consistency which most autobiographers strive to achieve. Paradoxically, however, this instability can be the appeal both for the writer, and for the reader/researcher because it allows for contradiction and change and, like "real life" it need have no closure until you die (or stop writing). There is also considerable freedom afforded by the use of a number instead of a real name. Finally, although this was not something which many people mentioned, the belief that their life was not worth writing about (or for younger people, not *yet* worth writing about) is offset by the sense of being part of a wider, collective enterprise. One life may be unexceptional, but placed alongside hundreds of others, it can play an important part in the whole mosaic of the everyday life they wish to record.

Those Mass-Observers who eschew autobiography as self-indulgent and self-promoting might be reluctant to agree with me that all their various shorter pieces of writing amount to a life story. For most of them, writing about their lives for Mass-Observation is meaningful, not primarily as an act of individual expression, but as a social and an historical act, or even, for some of them, a political act. They are documenting their times, and in doing so, writing themselves, and their families, friends and communities, into a particular and possibly alternative historical record. But I would argue with them, and with researchers looking at the material, that it is precisely because of the Mass-Observers' commitment to the historical record that their writings constitute a body of life history material *par excellence.* They write with a consciousness not only of their own role in the constructions of history, but also with a critical awareness of the possible uses and abuses of their writing which springs from a genuine research partnership engaged in the task of mapping our social lives.

12 And back to literacy

In relation to our work in literacy, then, we did not claim that the writing practices described by the Mass-Observers are typical of the population as a whole; on the contrary, we speculated that their writing practices, and especially the fact that they felt confident enough to volunteer for Mass-Observation, suggest that they are a rather special group. Writing, for them, was a complex source of pleasure and reward as well as an important intellectual and political form of communication. It therefore highlighted the very social activity with which we were concerned. It was precisely this "specialness" which offered us an opportunity to explore the connections between reading, writing and other social activities in the kind of detail which other forms of investigation cannot so readily offer. There is, as Stanley has argued, a "thickness" partly because there is such a wealth of information, embedded within such representations of people's everyday lives. However, the really valuable quality of the whole Mass-Observation project is the opportunity to identify models of social behaviour embedded in the ways people write. Their models of the writing process mediate and provide a clue to their models of society and these in turn underpin their descriptions of social data under particular topic headings and at particular times. It is these *models, or theories, of social behaviour*, rather than any quantitative generalisations about behaviour which can be fruitfully explored in the study of the practices of other social groups.

Bibliography

Barton, David & Ivanic, Roz, eds. (1991) *Writing in the Community*, Newbury Park, Sage.

Barton, David et al (1993) *Ordinary People Writing: the Lancaster and Sussex Writing Research Projects*. Working paper No. 51, Centre for Language in Social Life, Lancaster University.

Bertaux, Daniel (1981) "From the life history approach to the transformation of sociological practice" in Bertaux, D. (ed) *Biography and Society: the Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, London: Sage.

Bloome, David et al (1993) "Reading Mass-Observation Writing: theoretical and methodological issues in researching the Mass-Observation Archive" in *Auto/Biography: (Bulletin of the British Sociological Association Study Group on Auto/Biography)* Vol.2, No. 2. Also published as Mass-Observation Archive Occasional Paper No. 1, University of Sussex Library.

Bloome, David et al, (1995) "Literacy, personhood, power and the everyday lives of 'ordinary people': research with the Mass-Observation project. Paper delivered at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, April 1995.

Bohman, Stefan (1986) *The People's Story: On the Collection and Analysis of Autobiographical Materials*, Methodological Questions No. 3, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm.

Bornat, Joanna (1995) "Is oral history auto/biography?" in *Auto/Biography, (Bulletin of the British Sociological Association Study Group on Auto/Biography)* Special Double Issue on Lives and Works, Vol. 3, Nos 1 & 2, pp.17-30.

Cameron, Deborah et al, (1992) *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*, London: Routledge.

Fairclough, Norman (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ferrotti, Franco (1981) "On the anatomy of the biographical method" in Bertaux, D (ed) *Biography and Society: the Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, London: Sage.

Finch, Janet (1986) *Research and Policy: the Uses of Qualitative Methods in Social and Educational Research*, London: Falmer Press.

Foucault, Michel (1981) *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Frisch, Michael (1990) *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany: SUNY.

Gluck, Sherna Berger & Patai, Daphne (eds) (1991) *Women's Words; the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, London: Routledge.

Gullestad, Marianne & Almas, Reidar (1992) "Write your life: a Norwegian Life Story Contest" in *Oral History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp 61-65.

Hatch, J. Amos & Wisniewski, Richard (1995) "Life history and narrative: questions, issues and exemplary works" in Hatch & Wisniewski (eds) *Life History and Narrative*, London: Falmer Press, pp 113-135.

Heath, Shirley Brice (1983) *Ways with Words*, Cambridge: CUP.

Mass-Observation (1938) *First Year's Work*, London: Lindsay Drummond.

(1939) *Britain by Mass-Observation*, London: Penguin.

Mace, Jane (ed) (1995) *Literacy, Language and Community Publishing: Essays in Adult Education*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Okely, Judith & Calloway, Helen (eds) (1992) *Anthropology and Autobiography*, London: Routledge.

Plummer, Ken (1983) *Documents of Life: an introduction to the problems and literature of a humanistic method*, London: George Allen & Unwin.

Rosen, Harold (1993) *Troublesome Boy*, London: English and Media Centre

(1994) "Doing autobiography: memoirs and memory" seminar in the Mass-Observation Archive series, University of Sussex, 1 March.

Sheridan, Dorothy (ed) (1990) *Wartime Women: a Mass-Observation Anthology*, London: Heinemann.

(1991) "Women and Life History Work in East Central Europe", *Oral History*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp 63 - 67.

(1993a) "Writing for... questions of representation/representativeness, authorship and audience" in Barton et al, *Ordinary People Writing: the Lancaster and Sussex Writing Research Projects*. Working paper No. 51, Centre for Language in Social Life, Lancaster University.

(1993b) "Writing to the Archive: Mass-Observation as Autobiography", *Sociology*, Vol. 27, No.1, pp.101-113.

Sheridan, Dorothy & Perks, Rob (1995) "Methodology and methods of oral history and life stories in social research, report of a conference in Lviv, Ukraine", *Oral History*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp 29-32.

Stanley, Nick (1981) *The Extra Dimension: a Study and assessment of the methods employed by Mass-Observation in its first period 1937-40*, Ph.D. Thesis, CNAA.

Stanley, Liz (1992) *The Auto/Biographical I; Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*, Manchester: MUP.

(1993) "On auto/biography in Sociology" in *Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp.41-52.

(1994) "Sisters under the skin? Oral histories and auto/biographies" in *Oral History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp.88-89.

Street, Brian & Sheridan, Dorothy (1994) "Literacy Practices and the Mass-Observation Project", Report to the Economic and Social Research Council, R000233728.

Street, Brian (1984) *Literacy in Theory and Practice*; Cambridge, CUP.

ed. (1993) *Cross-cultural approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge: CUP

(1995) *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*, London: Longman.

Thomas, W.I. & Znaniecki, Florian (1958) *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*, New York: Dover Press.

Thompson, Paul (1988) *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford: OUP.

Thomson, Alistair et al (1995) "The memory and history debates: some international perspectives" in *Oral History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp 33-43.

Yin, Robert K (1989) *Case Study Research: Design and Method*, Newbury Park: Sage.

* This was a one year research project entitled "Literacy Practices and the Mass-Observation Project" which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. We were fortunate in being able to work with Professor David Bloome, of the Reading & Writing Program, School of Education, University of Massachusetts, during the year of our research. Professor Bloome was at the University of Sussex (where we are based) on a Fulbright scholarship.