



Methods for Change

Geographical Biography

Dr Cheryl McGeachan, *University of Glasgow*

Dr Amy Barron and Dr Ulrike Ehgartner,
The University of Manchester

Corresponding author

Dr Cheryl McGeachan

cheryl.mcgeachan@glasgow.ac.uk

Geographical Biography



Geographical Biography involves using the techniques from different forms of biography and archival research to uncover lives with a geographical sensitivity. While the aim of traditional biography is to understand the life of someone or something, the aim of a Geographical Biography is to uncover the sites, spaces, and places of their worlds, paying attention to the objects and materials that become enmeshed with their everyday existence.

A Geographical Biographer is less concerned with producing a sequential narrative of a life (as might be the case with traditional Biography or Life History) but more with foregrounding the messiness and complexity of a life through its geographies. Attention to the spaces of a life leads to the excavation of different kinds of archives, from buildings to people, from objects to artefacts. Human and non-human worlds collide in the reconstruction of lives lived and lost. Engaging with such a worldly archive approach has the potential to resurrect in new forms past lives and narratives, reintroducing them into the present. Geographical Biography therefore works in the margins of places and is particularly attuned to the voices and experiences of individuals lost and forgotten in other forms of historical writing.



How do Geographical Biographies create or contribute to change?

Geographical Biography is a process that encourages collaboration between people, objects, and place. Meaningful collaboration involves an exchange of ideas and this method enables opportunities for sharing to take place. Stories can be told in varying different contexts and formats, from prisons to museum tours, enabling a wide range of voices to be included.

The method's ability to promote understanding of individuals' worlds through the sharing of life stories becomes a strategy of empowerment.

Through sharing stories that have been overlooked or forgotten, it is possible to cultivate understanding about people, their lives, and their experiences and encourage others to share their stories too.

Geographical Biography is an accessible way to develop skills. There are multiple ways to tell the story of a life and encouraging the development of these narratives in collaboration is a fun and inclusive way of turning people into researchers. In this way, this method can encourage confidence in individuals and groups and inspire new ways of working in partnership, such as putting on exhibitions or creating artwork inspired by the lives investigated.

What ideas or concepts influence Geographical Biography?

In the social sciences, there is a tradition of using biography to rehearse how a life has been lived. This often involves recounting an individual-centric narrative which follows a chronological arc. More recently, biographies have been paired with geography to understand how lives interrelate over different times and spaces, calling to attention the importance of life-paths. Pairing biography with geography in

various guises has helped to shift the focus away from the notion of a unified life, to understand instead the multifarious nature of lives lived and worlds encountered. In doing so there has been a shift in the narration and presentation of such lives, sparking an array of creative approaches.

There has been a tendency in social scientific research to focus on what is present, what can be found or easily visited. However, in line with increased attention to more creative ways of researching and (re)presenting lives, Geographical Biography tends to work within the realms of absence, thinking about the gaps, shards, and fragments of what remains. In doing so, Geographical Biography can allow us to understand unseen (historical) subjects that might have been forgotten, overlooked, or be less obvious.

This method can be used in a variety of ways. Geographical Biography is an adaptable and creative method, reaching from traditional archival practice of working with documents, objects and photography, to working with landscape. Often it can include using objects to facilitate discussions about a life. Objects, such as artworks, can be used as tools for following the geographies of a life through the different sites, spaces, and places of their own existence. From homes to hospital gardens, objects can help to illuminate new biographical stories that tell us often unheard stories about where people go, what people do in certain spaces, and what places really matter to them. Objects and their geographies can also enable new lives to come into view. Through sharing the objects and their stories with others, conversations that transcend space and time can be found with individuals finding connections between their lives and others through object biographies.



Why might I want to use Geographical Biographies?

- Geographical Biographies can be used to research a range of phenomena, from individual experiences to collective understandings of people, places, and encounters.
- They provide people with the opportunity to create, share, and tell their own stories. They can be good for encouraging people to see value in their own lives. Through the process of sharing, people can understand that their story matters in the world and that it has agency and vibrancy.
- By paying attention to the everyday geographies of a life, Geographical Biographies can help to unearth hidden or often overlooked stories.
- This method can be used to reveal stories which might help to break down assumptions or stereotypes about certain groups of people or places. For example, in relation to the experiences of mental ill-health, institutionalisation, and incarceration.
- Geographical Biographies can be great at uncovering different kinds of worlds that are present and absent, all at the same time. While the focus of conversation may be around one individual life or the life of an individual object, this method facilitates an understanding into how individual lives intersect with other lives and places.
- Creating Geographical Biographies enables stories to be collectively shared with others in different and collaborative ways. They can be used to bring a group of people together to talk about a common object, person, or place. Such stories have the ability to spark new conversations and to enrich understandings of complex experiences.
- Geographical Biographies can be political tools to enable the voices and experiences of marginalised groups and individuals to be heard and valued.



Working collaboratively with the Art Extraordinary collection.



Step by step guide to using Geographical Biographies:

1. Creating Geographical Biographies

- Have a clear aim and identify who and what you need to engage with to achieve this aim. This could include the types of themes you would like to explore, such as mental ill-health, and/or the communities connected to this that you would like to talk with.
- Source the people you would like to talk with and get them together to talk about the object or person you are interested in.
- In these conversations, begin to map out what you know and what you do not know about the object or person. It is through this mapping exercise that you will begin to realise how the geography of an object really matters to the conversations that unfold about life.
- Bring in archive sources to build up a richer understanding. These might include photocopied resources that relate to the object or individual, such as diaries, letters, photographs, journals, committee minutes, films or objects.

- Think about how you can use these sources to find out what you do not know about the object or person and start to ask questions about that.

2. Sharing Geographical Biographies

- The stories you have shed light on could then be shared as an exhibit and shared with interested stakeholders.
- Think about where you might like to share your stories and be creative with this. This could be in a community centre, a walking tour, a museum, a prison, or a graveyard – anywhere that connects you to people that might be interested.
- Consider how to share these stories in relation to your audience. These could be written, sung, or performed. Working with others could help to develop your sharing potential, such as collaborating with storytellers.



Working collaboratively with the Art Extraordinary collection.



Examples of using Geographical Biography in social science research

Creating Geographical Biographies: Adam Christie

Researcher: Dr Cheryl McGeachan, University of Glasgow

It starts with a stone sculpture of a head located in a collection called Art Extraordinary housed by Glasgow Museums. The sculpture is part of a collection of Scottish outsider art, compiled by one of the first art therapists in Scotland, Joyce Laing. Many of the items in the collection were salvaged from the wards, gardens, and rubbish bins of old asylums and psychiatric facilities in the North-East of Scotland during the 1970s. Many of the unnamed artists were patients of these places yet their stories and experiences remain unknown, the only remaining remnants of them to me is the pieces of artwork held carefully in museum storage. These pieces speak to marginalised histories of mental ill-health and institutionalisation and therefore become ripe for Geo-Biographical investigation.

I started with the stone head. What clues could the sculpture tell me about its maker and where it was made? I spent time looking, feeling, and pondering over the stone in the museum storeroom. The closeness to the object was important, it helped me to think about its making. I began to compile questions about the object: who made it? Where was it made? How was the face created? Where was it found? Were there other stones and are they the same? Why was it made? Initial inquiries within the museum archive led to me to find out the artist's name: Adam Christie. The catalogue told me there were other stone heads in the collection and so I went to see them all. Further archival research led

me to uncover that he had been a patient at Montrose Asylum in the early-twentieth century and that the heads had been found there long after his death. Adam's life was largely unknown and uncovering his experiences had the potential to shed light into asylum worlds.

I decided to follow the stories of the stone. I visited Montrose Asylum, now an abandoned hospital facility, in the North-East of Scotland. I wanted to put the stone back in its place to see what new stories about Adam and asylum care would emerge. I walked through the gardens and passageways of the old hospital site and saw evidence of Adam's existence. On crumbling walls carefully carved words and faces emerged, left by Adam over seventy years ago. I walked through the local town and talked to its inhabitants. I was invited into homes and pubs to see some of Adam's sculptures that had been found over the years and told stories of their discovery. I was taken to his grave site in the hospital grounds and met members of his family. I visited local archives and accessed hospital records and files. I found a photograph of Adam on his first day at Montrose, after an overnight journey from his home in Shetland. I stood on the hospital carpark where Adam's stones had been made into concrete and destroyed.

The process of working with the stones to trace Adam's life led me to create a number of geographical biographies about his asylum worlds and beyond. While these are too multiple to note here, key stories emerged



about his unusual art making practice. Adam began to sculpt with stone twenty-two years after arriving at Montrose asylum. He used discarded materials from the asylum grounds to make his pieces, including a nail and a piece of glass to slowly carve the face into the stone. Once complete he would place the stone back where he found it – in a wall or on the ground – and begin carving something new. By following the stone heads we follow Adam's

life through the asylum, from the hospital gardens to various community spaces. We trace the stones back to his familial home in Shetland and to the intimate spaces of grief for his mother. We gain insights into the unusual spaces of asylum, such as a storeroom used as a workshop for creating art. Although we find no trace of Adam's own reflections on his experience, we still manage to hear something of him through the stones he left behind.

Examples of using Geographical Biography in social science research

Sharing Geographical Biographies: Exhibiting Mental Ill-Health

Researcher: Dr Cheryl McGeachan, University of Glasgow

Creating Geographical Biographies is one element of the process, but the method can be further utilised through the sharing of these stories in different contexts. Collaborating and working with these Geographical Biographies promotes the understanding that these are not static and complete portraits of individuals, but living and adaptable stories that are open to re-interpretation and change.

The Art Extraordinary collection is held by Glasgow Museums and therefore I wished to make the museum a key partner in the research process. Archivists and curators make great collaborators. Working in partnership with the collection we sought ways in which we could share the Geographical Biographies with different communities. Due to our shared interest in mental ill-health we saw this collection as a way to further the museum's engagement with mental health and creativity and sought out potential partners that connected with this theme. One long-standing partner with the museum

was Leverndale Hospital, a psychiatric facility on the edges of Glasgow, and they agreed to collaborate with us using the collection.

To highlight our shared interests in the collection we invited staff and patients from Leverndale Recreational Therapy to join us in the museum storeroom to look at the collection. As everyone looked, touched, and talked through the collection we shared aspects of the Geographical Biographies for each object and shared our experiences of them. After the session we collaboratively compiled a project plan based on the collection, noting that we would work together over a period of a year to create an exhibition on Art Extraordinary. During this project objects from the collection were taken to Leverndale to be handled and seen, stories were shared and written, and new artworks produced. Participants from the project selected the objects they wanted in the exhibition and wrote accompanying texts for them: they started to create their own Geographical Biographies



about the objects. Individuals shared their own experiences of mental ill-health, writing these into the stories of the objects and artists from the collection. An exhibition was produced and displayed in a local community space, and a one-year programme of community events accompanied this, using the geographical biographies as a foundation to encourage further conversation about mental ill-health and creativity.

Sharing the stories enabled a space to discuss mental ill-health in its multiple formations. Throughout the process we all learned new

skills, heard different voices, and gained insight into the worlds of others. The process itself was transformative. Participants noted that they gained in confidence, felt included and empowered, and enjoyed hearing learning about the lives of others. The collection too was changed by the process. New information and insights into the collection and its meaning was generated and for the first time the collection went on display in a museum setting. The collection became more known and the artist's stories for the first time were starting to be heard.

Where else could Geographical Biography be used?

Geographical Biographies are useful in any setting where understanding individual lives (of objects or people) is desirable. They have successfully been used in prison settings, psychiatric facilities, community groups, school classrooms, care homes, and many other places that involve human interaction. Their adaptable quality makes them a malleable resource and the approach can be easily adjusted to suit the nuances of the group and setting.

Top tips

1. Creating Geographical Biographies takes time and patience. Lives are often dispersed through places, and so are the stories about them. It is therefore important to take some time to consider where you want to start looking and try not to go everywhere at once.
2. Try to focus on one life, object, or place at a time and follow this through multiple terrains. Always take note of where

you encounter things, be this archival materials, marks in the landscape, or stories heard.

3. Creating different versions of the Geographical Biographies that can be shared in different contexts is useful. For example, creating materials for a museum tour has different requirements to a workshop setting so try to think about the varying ways in which you can produce these stories to be shared.
4. Never try to know everything and always remain open to the possibilities of finding out new and exciting things about the lives under investigation.
5. Importantly, always remember that these are human lives and their stories that are being re-created and re-told. The ethics of telling is crucial to the enterprise of Geographical Biography and respecting the humanness of experience must always be considered.



Further reading

- The Head Carver': Art Extraordinary and the small spaces of the asylum.
- Researching art extraordinary: a fieldwork photo-collage essay.

To reference: McGeachan, C. Barron, A. Ehgartner, U. (2021). 'Geographical Biography' in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



To read about more exciting social science methods, the full range of *Methods for Change* 'how to' guides can be found here