PART 3

*Diversity as a Content and as a Feature
of Biographic Enquiry*

Understanding Women's Lives through Critical Feminist Perspectives: Working-Class Women Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the relationship between critical feminist perspectives and feminist biographical methods in understanding the lives of working-class women in higher education. It explores the contribution of feminist methodology to biographical methods and its power to give 'voice' and richness to women's stories. Feminist biographical methods, stress, importantly, the subjectivity and intersubjectivity in research and the need for a humanistic and egalitarian approaches between the interviewer and interviewee. The stories told highlight the collectiveness of individual stories as well as the role of agency and structure (micro and macro) in the ecology of everyday lives. The women's stories illustrate how lives and identity are constructed and shaped by the intersection of gender and class. The women defined themselves as being working-class women. And although studying for a degree in higher education change their lives they did not let go of their class identity.

Keywords

gender – class – women adult students – higher education – biographical methods

1 Introduction

My interest in the women stemmed from my concern with the larger problem of how women struggle to make something of their lives ... they (students) shared a strong belief that education was a viable route by which to reach their objectives ... They hoped that a return to education would improve their status, income, conditions of employment, knowledge, autonomy and sense of well-being. (McClaren, 1985, p. 149)

Feminist research has made a significant contribution to shaping our understanding of the lives of working-class women students in higher education (HE) through biographical narrative methods (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 2003; Merrill, 2014). The engagement with biographical narrative methods in adult education research has been, and still is, dominant in Europe particularly, but also beyond (West et al., 2007), influenced not only by feminism but other perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, oral history, hermeneutics, postmodernism, and ethnography. These various approaches originate from different intellectual traditions in various European countries. The popularity of biographical methods in adult education was facilitated by the 'turn' to biographical methods in the social sciences more generally (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) over the last thirty years. The work of the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA) has been fundamental in developing and establishing biographical methods and in recognizing and encouraging diverse approaches to research from the more objective perspective of the German tradition to more subjective ones in the UK, Italy and Sweden. The ESREA Life History and Biographical Network has played a dominant role in this process although other networks such as the Access, Learning Careers and Identities and Gender Networks have also contributed. Within adult education it marked a welcome and refreshing change to the early, mostly quantitative research using surveys (Woodley et al., 1987) which reduced adult students to numbers and statistics thus dehumanizing them. In contrast biographical methods offers a humanistic and subjective approach (Plummer, 1991) enabling students to tell their own stories, revealing the complexities of individual lives in more in-depth and nuanced ways. In the UK biographical methods in adult education research have been heavily influenced by symbolic interactionism through the work of the Chicago School of Sociology and feminism.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between critical feminist perspectives and biographical methods in understanding the lives of working-class women students in UK higher education (HE). It will explore the contribution of feminist methodology to biographical methods and its power to 'give voice' and richness to women's stories, and in doing so, highlighting the collectivity of individual stories as well as the role of agency and structure in everyday lives which are situated within the interacting contexts of the micro, meso and macro worlds. To illustrate this, I will draw on my research undertaken over twenty years with working-class women students from different ethnic backgrounds within the context of a UK elite university. What is striking in all the stories I have heard is the dominance of class, gender, and for some, race

and the interaction between them in their lives in the family, work, university, community and society more generally. Being working class and being proud of it and being different to the younger middle-class students and 'not wanting to be like them' as one woman said was central to their biographies. After gaining a degree the women continued to define themselves as working-class even though it did distance some of them a bit from their family, friends and community. Their identity as a woman is, therefore, related to being working-class. First, however, I will discuss the contribution of critical feminism to biographical methods and adult education research as it offers a particular and distinct stance to biographical research. Feminist research contributes to the ecology of life by highlighting the daily lives of women at the micro, meso and macro levels and how they constantly live in different spheres so that their life on campus.

2 Critical Feminism and Biographical Methods

Reinharz (1992) and other feminists asserted that feminist research is a perspective rather than a distinctive method which draws on feminist theory. For Burns and Walker (2005): "Feminist research is thus always more than a matter of method and raises philosophical issues of ontology ... and epistemology" (p. 66). However, although the research methods used by feminists are not new, they do offer a distinctive approach, for example, in the way that biographical interviews are undertaken and the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Feminist research in the academy developed in the 1970s and stemmed from the second wave feminist movement (Smith, 1987) and was primarily, but not exclusively, located within the discipline of sociology. It partly developed in response and opposition to male sociology or as feminists termed it 'malestream' as women's lives were ignored in sociological research and deemed as unimportant. This situation was challenged through studies such as *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (1981) by Anna Pollert and *Becoming a Mother* (1979) by Ann Oakley amongst others. Feminist research, therefore, began to challenge and question the notion of who has the power to construct knowledge and whose voices are being heard. More broadly it was also in opposition to 'traditional', positivistic research which objectifies the research participant reducing them to a statistical number. Both 'malestream' sociology and quantitative research makes women invisible and hidden from society. Quantitative research also does not take experiences, emotions, feelings, interactions and context into account. Feminist research became a powerful tool and voice for

counteracting this. Such research according to Finch on reflecting about the link between qualitative research and feminism stated that:

... second wave feminism were incredibly potent for those of us who were young sociologists at that time, and were bound to make a huge impact on what we did and the way in which we thought about doing it ... the kind of ideas that were coming out of the feminist politics. (2007, p. 62)

For Finch (2007) the critical point in the UK in linking qualitative methods (biographical) to feminist research was the publication by Ann Oakley (1981) of her article "Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms". Understanding this historical context and influence of second wave feminism is important as it still continues to shape the epistemological and empirical approaches used by feminist researchers and feminist adult education researchers in particular. But we must not forget that feminist researchers in developing their research methods were also influenced by symbolic interactionism as well as the work of C. Wright Mills but taking it to a more critical and political level. By using biographical methods feminist researchers gave 'voice' to marginalized women and as Reinharz (1992) asserts:

Biographical work has always been an important part of the women's movement because it draws women out of obscurity, repairs the historical record and provides an opportunity for the woman reader and writer to identify with the subject. (p. 126)

Thus "feminism encompassed a critical perspective that challenged some of the ideas of conventional research, as patriarchal and phallogentric ..." (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 29).

The concern was, and is, with highlighting women's oppression in society at the macro, meso and micro levels and challenging this through research for social change to transform women's lives. Feminist research is overtly political – encapsulated in the feminist term 'the personal is political'. As Lawthom (2004) stresses "Feminist standpoint epistemologies in research emphasize the perspectives of those whose lives are shaped and constrained (or marginalized) by the dominant social order" (p. 102). As a result of feminist research women's voices were no longer silenced as the lives of women became a focus of research. Biographical methods were central in this process. As Popadiuk (2004) explains:

The feminist biographical method is a powerful tool. It engages in research from a unique perspective that provides depth, meaning and context to

the participants' lived experiences in light of the larger cultural matrix in which they live. (p. 395)

The second wave feminists' notion that only women can research women to obtain a full understanding of women's lives ignores the fact that women are diverse as there are cultural, class, ethnic and age differences which affects a woman's experience and position in society. So being a middle-class woman is different to being a working-class woman and being a black working-class woman is different to being a white working-class woman, for example bell hooks (1982) argued in her book *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* that while women are linked by oppression the experiences are not the same for black and white women. For hooks feminism spoke for the white middle class women and stressed instead that feminism should not only be about women but also link to other forms of oppression such as class and race.

Feminist research in the UK has largely focused on working-class women thus highlighting the intersection between class and gender, recognizing that working-class women's lives were different to those of middle-class women in terms of, for example, economic, social and cultural capital. Being a woman and being working-class cannot be separated and this is illustrated in the stories of working-class women in HE I have interviewed. This is also echoed in the work of Beverley Skeggs (1997), and others, who asserts that "... the category 'woman' is always produced through processes which include class and classifying produces very real effects which are lived on a daily basis" (p. 2). She continues "The women never see themselves as just women: it is always read through class" (1997, p. 91). UK feminism, however, shifted away from its roots with second wave feminism and its focus on critical perspectives and the lives of working women from the 1990s as postmodernism took hold within the academy and particularly within sociology:

The emergence and stronghold of postmodernism and the decline of Marxist feminism in the academy has established a discourse which is far removed from the material reality of working-class women. Academic feminism is becoming elitist, excluding 'other women' through its language and content. (Merrill & Puigvert, 2001, p. 308)

As a result, the use of biographical methods was overshadowed by the new forms of feminist approaches such as postmodernism. Research became more theoretical and abstract and no longer situated in the reality of working-class women's lives (Merrill & Puigvert, 2001). This was not the case I would argue, within the field of adult education research where it has been embraced by

feminist adult educators as a way of understanding working class women's learning experiences by linking past and present lives.

3 Feminist Adult Education

Until the 1990s research on women adult students in the UK focused largely on women in non-HE settings (Thompson, 1985; McLaren, 1985; Kennedy, 1987) providing valuable insight into their learning, classed and gendered experiences. The impact of policies on widening participation and the establishment of Access programmes (courses for adults for entry into HE) changed this. Several studies began to emerge in the 1990s looking at access into higher education (Sperling, 1991), experiences in higher education (Pascall & Cox, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Reay, 2003) and on the separateness and connectedness between studying and family life (Edwards, 1993). Later research has explored the intersection between gendered and classed experiences in both further and higher education (Skeggs, 1997; Tett, 2000; Reay, 2003; Merrill, 2015).

Using biographical narrative approaches enabled feminist adult education researchers to highlight the complexities and sometimes struggles of working-class women students' lives both inside and outside the academy – something which earlier adult education quantitative research could not do. Such approaches illuminate inequalities in a woman's life around gender and class for as Jane Thompson (2000), a UK adult education researcher, asserts telling one's story is:

... a way of exercising critical consciousness and of producing knowledge from the inside about gender, class and education, deriving from personal, particular and shared experience. Not in the pursuit of ultimate truth but in the search for greater, more nuanced understanding. (p. 6)

4 The Distinctiveness of Feminist Methodology

Feminist biographical researchers have established a distinctive approach to undertaking biographical narrative interviews. Such interviews are a dialogical, empowering and sometimes transformative process as well as being an educational and learning experience for both interviewer and interviewee. Feminist contribution to methodology and biographical interviewing manifests itself in several ways and contrasts greatly, as stated above, with traditional approaches to research. This involves establishing a different and democratic

relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Oakley, 1981) so that feminist researchers work with women and not on women (Oakley, 1981). It thus aims to avoid exploitation and an instrumental approach to research. It is, therefore, important to build up trust and respect and a secure environment to give women a voice to tell their story. Such an approach to research challenges by breaking down power differences as far as possible so that, as Oakley (1981) argues, the interview becomes more like a conversation with the interviewer and interviewee sharing their story in an ecology of communication and sharing. Not only does the interviewing process become subjective but also intersubjective as interviews are an interactive social process. As Stanley and Wise (1993) stress, "Personhood cannot be left out of the research process ... We see the presence of the researcher's self as central in all research" (p. 161). Biographical feminist interviewing is a collaborative interaction whereby stories are co-constructed and owned. Giving the transcript back to interviewees enables them to say whether or not the interview is an accurate representation of their story. Rebecca Lawthom (2004) takes the interviewing process and ownership of the story a step further as she states that: "The emancipatory framework ... allows the interviewee – or co-researcher – to shape the story, have full editorial control and present a first-person narrative" (p. 60).

Biographical approaches enables us to understand the role of agency and structure (two fundamental foundations in sociology) in people's lives and the inter-relationship between them as well as locating individual lives within a historical, social, political and economic context (Wright Mills, 1967; Bertaux, 1981). For critical feminist researchers such processes highlight how individual stories at the micro level are also collective ones at a macro level acted out in contexts at a meso level so that issues of inequality such as gender and class are illuminated. "Yet in constructing a biography a person relates to significant others and social contexts: a biography is, therefore, never fully individual" (Merrill, 2007, p. 7).

5 Working-Class Women Students' Voices

The voices presented here are those of working-class women adult students who I have interviewed in relation to several EU funded research projects which have focused primarily on the experiences of adult students studying in higher education and the effects which this has on the self, families and future lives. More recently my research shifted to issues on transitions and inequalities from higher education into the labour market. Their stories reveal commonalities of gendered and classed lives in relation to domesticity, education, family and

work. In relation to schooling, as feminist academics have highlighted, education prepared them through the curriculum for their future roles as wife, mother, domesticity and 'female' jobs (Deem, 1978; Spender, 1982; Sharpe, 1982, 1994). The women in my studies were no exception. Lynne summarizes their experiences;

I started school in 1969. Girls went to school, just did it, then got married. You know – had a little job and then got married so there is no encouragement whatsoever ... it was just the norm. Women just got married and had children and that was that.

Teachers had low expectations of girls' futures and this was also reinforced by the cultural attitudes of many working-class parents and illustrating how the interplay of micro, meso and macro levels shaped the women's lives. Jane felt that she had no encouragement from her teachers:

... fifteen with absolutely nothing. No exams sat so no exams passed. I went to work in a factory sewing lace on knickers because that was what I was told I was capable of. I was good at needlework and I still am.

Others would have liked to have continued with schooling so for them returning to learn at university was about completing their education:

I was well behaved and got on with my work. I just feel that there was a lot of potential that I had that was totally wasted because assumptions were made about me. Too young at the time to know but I do feel it came back to my background and my family and where I lived and that influenced how they treated me and that's why college was never really mentioned. (Paula)

Engagement in learning often involves the complex interaction of several factors. One important motive, particularly for women, was self-development – wanting something better in life and 'to complete my education'.

The women followed similar life histories of entering unskilled work after leaving school until they married and had children. The family became the focus of their lives which many found stifling and unfulfilling. Time spent in the home looking after children or working in an unskilled job prompted women to reflect upon their lives and their identity, leading them to want to become someone other than a mother or wife (Merrill, 1999). They were looking for a way out of domestic life, wanting 'more to life than this' as one woman said, and used their agency to break from cultural and structural constraints:

Well I know for me just being in the house with the wee (small) ones – it's like you have no one to talk to – well you have them but no adults. You could go a bit mad. It's good to get out of the house and to do things. To keep your brain active. It's not good to be stuck in the house all the time. (Anne)

The isolation of being confined in a house with young children was a common motivating factor for wanting to return to learn; 'to get back into civilization' as one woman described it. Paula stated several times in her story that 'there has got to be more to life than this' upon reflecting about her job working in a bank where she noticed that male employees were treated better than female employers. Biographies also reveal the importance of critical incidents or epiphanies (Denzin, 1989), such as divorce, bereavement or redundancy which act as turning point moments. Some had been contemplating returning to education for a number of years but did not take any action until the experience of a critical incident pushed them into learning. For several women it was divorce as Julie explains; "I really didn't go out much when I was married so then I had to kind of force myself to start to go out". Critical incidents often act as an enabling factor:

... at that time I was in a violent relationship so it made me realize that this is not the situation that you're supposed to have in your life so you've got to overcome things and you've got to do things ... I wouldn't have done the things that I'm doing now because it's taken from then to this to do what I'm doing – yes it was a turning point. (Kate)

Often it is a configuration of circumstances that allows for the shift from non-participation to participation (and vice versa) through the exercise of human agency. It is an ecology of everyday life and a desire to change and fulfil themselves as women and a human being. Gender and class issues play an important role in these shifts. Being stuck in the home gave time for reflection about being a working-class woman and the possibilities for breaking out of their traditional role. It is the interaction of changes in the relationship between agency (micro) and structure (macro) that provides what Strauss (1953/1969) describes as 'turning point' which encourages people to 'take stock, to re-evaluate, revise, re-see and re-judge'. Change was, therefore, a common theme that reverberated throughout many of the stories of women wanting to escape from an unfulfilling life at work, in the home and/or a life of living on a low income. The meso level of education was perceived as the answer: a tool for achieving transformation and a better life.

Becoming a university student, however, for most of the women did not liberate them from their domestic and childcare tasks. Being a student was another role and responsibility they had to take on alongside their other roles, unlike the male adult students who had support from their partners and felt no guilt (Merrill, 1999). Juggling became a way of life:

Time is one of the biggest factors with being a mature student because of fitting in with all of the home activities and different roles and trying so that everybody else does not feel left out. I keep trying to accommodate them as well as all the other work. It is difficult to handle and I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes and think 'I have been a terrible mother lately because I have not done this or that. It is worth it on the whole though, but it is quite demanding. (Cathy)

Many found life exhausting but for Rose 'it is necessary in order for me to achieve my future goals'. For some the only time they could study at home was once the children had gone to bed until the early hours of the morning. While some were lone parents others were married and studying caused friction in their relationship and a few left their relationship as a result of studying. Kate's experience was not unusual:

I have not particularly enjoyed the trouble I have had to encounter at home. It is hard work with the work and the children. My husband is not supportive. He has not got a degree but has professional qualifications. He has always regarded me as being thick. I think it has all come as a bit of a shock to him. I think he kept expecting people to throw me off the course. He can now see that I will be able to support myself and the children in the future and sees this as a threat. (Kate)

Despite the constant struggles to balance studying with domestic work the women were determined and motivated to keep on going and succeed (Merrill, 2015). For a minority, however, this was not the case and the struggles they faced with their self and other factors such as health, finance, learning and family became too much and they left. I interviewed some of them after they left. They did not discuss leaving and not obtaining a degree as being negative as they felt that they had learnt from the experience in different ways and changed as a result. A few others took temporary withdrawal of a term or a year before resuming their studies.

Studying at an elite university raised awareness of class, gender and age differences between themselves and the younger students. Cultural and economic differences became apparent especially in seminar discussions as Liz discovered:

They come from a very different background and that's when I found I couldn't speak. In the module Politics and Food we (the mature women students) were talking about school dinners and were saying that they had to be good because this is the only hot meal they get and they couldn't understand that at all. Daddy had bought them ponies and daddy had got them this car.

Doing a degree also distanced some women in terms of class from other women in their community as their new identity developed. Julie, a lone parent, describes it in the following way:

I couldn't talk about university to any other mums as I walked to school because I felt that they had snubbed me – 'look at you with your big briefcase. It was all really tricky to explain to people why I wanted to 'progress' myself. I withdrew from my friends on the estate because I found it hard to explain to them why I wanted something different.

Her parents could also not understand why she wanted to study and in working class terms she was seen as 'getting above herself'. This experience of distancing was emotional to her and as Hoggart (1957) asserts it is an isolating experience.

In coming to the end of their degree studies the women reflected upon their HE experiences in relation to their lives prior to studying.

I did my degree to prove something to myself. To get my degree that I should have got when I was 18 ... So to prove to myself that I can get qualifications and for my children as well so that they would think it's the norm ... When I reflected back on my degree it has changed my identity – it changes a lot for me personally. I think it changes everything. It changes my mindset. (Sally)

For Julie, gaining a degree was about obtaining a better life for herself and her son which in practical terms enabled her to move out of a deprived housing estate. And like Sally and others it was about self-improvement:

I can't explain that feeling of not just pride but about being part of something ... I'd actually come to the end of something quite brilliant and I should feel really, really proud.

In telling their stories the women reflected upon their gendered and classed lives and how studying for a social science degree had made them more aware

of these issues and what being a working-class woman means in relation to their identity and their relationship to learning, family, friends and work.

6 Summary

The women's voices above offer a brief snapshot of working-class women students' experiences of learning in HE. Being a student provided the women with a transitional space to reflect upon past biographies in terms of who they had been, what they have now become and what they may become in the future. Together the experiences of learning and using feminist biographical interviews has the potential to enable them to think critically about their lives and the inequalities they have faced as "a university education can be a powerful biographical experience" (Merrill, 2015, p. 1869). Their stories also revealed that individual experiences are also collective ones as echoed by second wave feminists as they shared similar experiences of life. Importantly the stories also highlight the dialectics of agency and structure in shaping lives. Although the women were constrained from time to time with their degree studies they were also able to be agentic and change their lives and the lives of their children in some ways. They adopted and enjoyed an academic life while also holding on to their identity as a working-class woman albeit in a more critical way. As Ryan (2002) argues education, particularly in the social sciences, is a powerful experience for women:

... I can get women to focus on contradictions, that is, the reasons why they want changes in their lives and came to the course in the first place, and where these desires show up the cracks in the social façade, then there is the possibility of politicisation. If I can facilitate women to see where they are powerful and resisting as well as seeing how constraining power relations work in their lives, this can help them make changes and be agentic. (pp. 126–127)

The women's stories illustrate the ecology of everyday life and how lives change through the interaction of micro, meso and macro experiences. Their learning experiences took place within an elite middle-class university: an environment which is different to their working-class family and community environments. The women had to learn to cope (although a few did not) with living in these two worlds. Studying at university enriched and changed their lives in how they view the world more critically and in terms of better employment and fulfilling lives. But one aspect of their lives remained constant

– they continued to define themselves as working-class women. Biographical research is powerful in illuminating lives and giving voice to those who tell their story as well as highlighting the important role which adult education plays in people's lives.

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