PART 1

**BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH, ORAL HISTORY AND
COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING**

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2. BIOGRAPHICAL INQUIRY

A Collaborative and Egalitarian Approach to Adult Education Research

INTRODUCTION

Biographical inquiry enables us as researchers and adult educators to grasp an in-depth understanding of the complexities and nuances of learning in adults' lives in a collaborative and egalitarian way. There has been a 'turn' to biographical methods in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000) over the past thirty years. Perhaps it is more accurate to say this is a renewed interest as oral history and biographical research has a long tradition in disciplines like sociology and history which faded due to the strengthening of positivism. The 'turn' was, therefore, a response and a reaction to the dominance of scientific and objective approaches to understanding human behaviour which mimics that of the natural sciences. Such an approach silences the voices of marginalized groups and dehumanizes people reducing the understanding of lives to mere statistics which are devoid of meaning, life and context and subsequently many social scientists began to question this (Roberts, 2002), including adult education researchers within Europe.

The biographical tradition in European adult education was established through the work of people such as Agnieszka Bron, Peter Alheit, Pierre Dominicé, Henning Salling Olesen and Linden West. Their work marked an important move away from early research on adult students which were mostly large-scale quantitative studies (Woodley et al., 1987). Biographical methods "offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1) which quantitative methods cannot do. This 'movement', particularly within the UK, was influenced by the work of symbolic interactionists from the Chicago School and feminist scholarship which put the human subject at the core of the research process (Plummer, 2001). There are parallels here with student-centred adult education practice. Other influences have shaped UK biographical approaches such as the psychosocial and more recently the German interpretive tradition as in the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2000).

As biographical inquiry has developed it has been used alongside art and drama-based approaches and the collection of artefacts as well. This chapter outlines a critical and feminist perspective approach drawing on symbolic interactionism and how this helps in the understanding of people's lives and adult learning. It draws on research on non-traditional students in higher education to illustrate not only the

complexities of undertaking biographical research but also its richness and power in revealing the particular and general, structure and agency, the macro and the micro in the individual and collective lives of adult learners. It will argue for the importance of ‘voice’ and dialogue, even conversation, between the researcher and research participants in the co-construction of stories. While many biographical researchers view the stories as individual, I see individual lives as also telling collective stories and histories through, for example, experiences of class, gender, ethnicity and adult learning thus highlighting issues of inequality. Methodological aspects of doing such research will also be explored.

A FEMINIST & SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Biographical and life history approaches are now one of the most widely used methods in adult education research, particularly in Europe. Its popularity is visible at European conferences and in adult education journal articles. The European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA) Life History and Biographical Network has been critical in encouraging and developing the use of biographical methods in varied adult education contexts such as higher education, community education, the workplace as well as informal learning in the family and elsewhere. The ‘turn’ to biographical methods brought subjectivity centre stage in the research process and the meaning which people give to their lives. Although popular, biographical inquiry in adult education is characterized by heterogeneity which leads to richness and stimulates debate. This also reflects the fact that researchers in adult education draw on a range of disciplines and perspectives such as sociology, psychology, philosophy and education. Biographical inquiry is also conducted in very diverse ways. In Germany and Denmark, for example, an objective hermeneutics position is favoured whereby the researcher remains distant in order not to shape the account. This approach is exemplified in the work of adult education researchers Peter Alheit and Henning Salling Olesen. In Germany this orientation was partly about making biographical research respectable within a very traditional academic system. In contrast in the UK and Sweden the role of subjectivity and intersubjectivity was viewed as important, heavily influenced by feminism and the work of the Chicago School.

My particular approach has been sociological, influenced by feminism, symbolic interactionism and critical theory, taking a humanistic and subjectivistic approach to research, what Plummer calls a “critical humanism” (2001, p. 14). On the surface my selection of symbolic interactionism and feminism may appear to be oppositional and contradictory as symbolic interactionism focuses on the individual and micro social theory while many versions of feminism and critical theory emphasize collective conditions and social inequality. However, I would argue that there are similarities and complementarities between them. The work of the Chicago School and, in particular, that of Goffman and Becker had a strong impact on me because it encompasses a humanistic philosophy and celebrates the agentic possibility in

people's lives, marking a move away from the determinism of positivism. The Chicago School of Sociology has been influential in the development of biographical inquiry. This goes back to 1918–1921 and the classic study by Thomas and Znaniecki – *The Polish Peasant* – on the experience of Polish peasants in a new cultural context to later in the 1960s and 1970s with studies such as *The Jack-Roller* by Clifford R. Shaw (1966). Significantly symbolic interactionism places the social actor and the meaning and interpretation they give to their lives and social situation as central to understanding human behavior (Blumer, 1986).

Interaction with others and how others see us is key to the formation of the self, biography and our definition of the social world. For symbolic interactionists interaction is seen as “a crucial link between the individual and the social group” (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975, p. 50). Constructing the social world is a situated activity. The distinct methodological approach of symbolic interactionism and its focus on the social actor stresses the importance of ‘telling it like it is’. Like feminists much of the research centres on the marginalized in society and ‘sticking up for the underdog’ (Becker, 1967) who also asserts that researchers should ask themselves ‘Whose side are we on?’ There is also a tradition of illuminating individual resistance to the power of institutions (Goffman, 1961). As Plummer elucidates “It is a fully dialectical theory where subject and object, creativity and restraint, pattern and chaos, structure and meaning, knowledge and action are ceaselessly emergently intertwined” (1991, p. xv).

Rooted in a liberal tradition symbolic interactionism only takes us so far in looking at issues of power and inequality. Feminists take a more critical and political stance than this, particularly Marxist feminists. Second wave feminism in the 1970s stimulated the development of feminist theory and methodology in academia and critique of traditional ‘malestream’ research. Dorothy Smith asserts “The women’s movement has given us a sense of our right to have women’s interests represented in sociology, rather than just receiving as authoritative the interests traditionally represented in a sociology put together by men” (1987, p. 85). In doing so feminists were questioning who has the power to construct knowledge. The everyday lives of ordinary women were deemed to be important bringing women out of obscurity through research. Feminists emphasized how ‘the personal is political’ whereby individual experiences become collective ones. This idea can also be traced back to the work of C. Wright Mills who elaborated that: “... know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of individual life” (1970, p. 8). Importantly feminist research gives ‘voice’ to marginalized women through the telling of their stories. For Reinharz “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 the opportunity for the woman reader and writer to identify with the subject” (1992, p. 126). Feminist researchers, in contrast to ‘traditional’ research, work with women and not on women (Oakley, 1981) to avoid exploitation.

Feminist researchers have contributed to the development of biographical methodology in various ways. A subjective (and intersubjective) engagement is advocated between the researcher and researched in a form which challenges and breaks down power differences to establish a more democratic relationship than in traditional hierarchical approaches to interviewing. Ann Oakley (1981) took this further in promoting the idea that an interview should be more like a conversation which may include the researcher sharing some of their story so it becomes a participatory process. For Natalie Popadiuk "... 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" (2004, p. 395). Research, it is stressed, is a political process. The 'voices' of the women highlight oppression and inequalities in society which need to be challenged and transformed. Undoubtedly feminist researchers had, and still have, a significant impact on biographical research in the UK, including adult education research, with many adult education researchers carrying on the feminist research tradition. As Jane Thompson reminds us "But it is what becomes of the stories that matters. And what uses can be made of them in the search for political knowledge and theoretical understanding" (2000, p. 7).

LEARNING FROM BIOGRAPHIES

In researching the experiences of non-traditional adult students in higher education I am interested in looking at issues of class and gender and their intersectionality. I connect individual stories of non-traditional students to class and gender experiences by linking the micro to the macro and locating a biography within a social, political, economic and historical context.

As Denzin points out biographies reveal "an inner world of thought and experience and to an outer world of events and experiences" (1984, p. 66). Bertaux also reminds us that biographies reveal the common experiences of structure: "The intent of the biographical project is to uncover the social, economic, cultural, structural and historical forces that shape, distort and otherwise alter problematic lived experiences" (1981, p. 4). Biographical methods importantly illuminate the two fundamental foundations of sociology – agency and structure. It encompasses a key question in relation to what extent lives are shaped and or constrained by social structure and to what extent lives can be changed through intentional actions. A person's life is never fully agentic or structurally determined but rather an interaction between the two although at certain moments one aspect may be more dominant. The stories of working-class adult students in higher education illustrate the role of agency and structure in shaping their learning identities and career. Agency is used, for example, in taking the decision to study for a degree as an adult and a determination to succeed but this may be constrained by structural factors such as financial issues. The interaction of agency and structure are also at play in life transition processes and biographical narratives highlight transitions in the learning

life course (Hallqvist, Ellström, & Hayden, 2012; Biesta et al., 2011). Experiencing and coping with life transitions is a biographical learning experience as a person's biography is linked with learning or biographicity as termed by Alheit and Dausien (2002). Learning, from this perspective, is an integral part of a person's biography so that "without biography there can be no learning, without learning there is no biography" (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 15).

Biographical research can be used in radical, collective and practical ways by combining "the principles and practice of biographical methods with those underpinning feminism and radical/popular adult education" (Merrill, 2007, p. 86). Such research enables educators to understand where their students are coming from. This is in the tradition of popular education which advocates including the learners' experiences in the curriculum in order to challenge the structural inequalities they face. Drawing on the idea of Pierre Dominicé (2000) biographies can be used as a learning resource in the 'classroom' as a means of enabling learners to understand their way of learning in universities or in adult/community education.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF DOING BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

This section draws on a European study on the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education and their subsequent transition into the labour market to illustrate the complexities but also the value of doing biographical research. The project is entitled 'Enhancing the Employability of Non-traditional Students in Higher Education' (EMPLOY) and involved six European countries but this chapter will focus on the UK study. Employability is currently given high priority by universities and policy-makers and there is an assumption that all students will benefit in the labour market by learning to become 'employable'. Our research, however, took a critical stance on employability as adopted by a few other researchers such as Tomlinson (2012). The voices of the working-class adult students we interviewed revealed experiences of inequality in relation to employability and transitioning to the labour market as HE institutions are not a level playing field. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms middle-class students have advantages in terms of social, cultural and economic capitals and age which make them more favourable to employers than adult working-class graduates. Collectively the participants' stories offer a powerful critique of the hierarchical UK higher education system. They also highlight the entrenchment of class, gender, race and age inequalities and practices in society. In terms of sampling we interviewed students in their first year of degree study and again after graduation as well as a cohort of graduates. Longitudinal research helps a researcher to build trust and really get to know participants' lives in depth. Importantly it highlights changes to the self over time.

Using biographical methods in this study generated thick description or 'a good story'. "By good stories we mean narrative material that is both rich in detail but also experientially inclusive and reflective in character" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 113). Biographical interviews involve interpretation by the interviewee and

interviewer and are spaces which are creative and dialogical. Importance is attached to building secure, collaborative relationships to listening and working respectfully with participants (Stanley & Wise, 1993) as well as emphasizing that biographical interviews are a form of learning for those involved. Building a trusting relationship is central to the interview process (Oakley, 1981). Following the feminist tradition we strove to build a more equal and democratic relationship between the interviewer and interviewee encouraging a conversational style. Biographical interviewing is a social process and the subjectivity and inter-subjectivity of both the interviewee and the interviewer forms part of this as stories are co-structured and interpreted. As Stanley and Wise point out:

All research involves, as its basis, interaction, a relationship, between researcher and researched ... Because the basis of all research is a relationship. This necessarily involves the presence of the researcher as a person. Personhood cannot be left out of the research process ... We see the presence of the researcher's self as central in the research. (1993, p. 161)

Such an interview approach is more demanding and intense for the researcher than 'traditional' approaches. A collaborative interview should involve the participants as fully as possible in the research process, not only during the interview but afterwards through giving their story back to them as a transcript. This enables participants to reflect on their story and add to it if they want or even delete sentences through a "dialogical processes that assist story givers in untangling the complex meanings of their own lived experience" (Lawthom, 1997, p. 456).

UNDERSTANDING CLASS AND HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH BIOGRAPHICAL METHODS

More than other research methods biographical approaches reveal the complexities and inequalities experienced in people's everyday lives at both an individual and collective level. This section looks at the significance of these aspects through the stories of non-traditional adult students in higher education studying at an elite UK university and their transition to the graduate labour market. The following is not an in-depth outline of their lives but a partial one. All were working-class and for women and black students class inequality is also intersected by gender and race. Age inequality was another key factor which impacted on all of them in relation to entering the labour market. In their teens they did not consider going to university and these attitudes were related to class and gender cultures in their family and community. As Paul reflects:

It was a working-class area and people didn't really do well academically there. I don't think it's any reflection of how capable people are but there was just a kind of culture of you didn't want to be a swot ... My family weren't too pushy and the idea that university is a waste of time. It wasn't an option for me'.

For Sue:

There was no pressure at all that I remember from parents. It was do whatever you want to do and what's going to make you happy and I was like 'I have no idea what I want to do.

As a result most of the participants left school with few or no qualifications. Some undertook a range of jobs before entering university which were unskilled or semi-skilled and low paid – jobs which some found boring. Paul, for example, ended up as a roofer working for his uncle. Studying for a degree offered them a potential for more fulfilling lives and an opportunity denied them at eighteen. Most studied a social studies degree aimed at local adult students. While there is another local university they chose Warwick because it is a top institution in the belief that it would help them in the competitive labour market. Sharon chose law conscious of the university hierarchy and attitudes of employers: "it is the best especially for Law and I know that solicitors can be quite prickly about which university you've been to, to whether they employ you or not. I've got into the top five universities from coming from nothing". Once in the institution participants became aware of class (and age) differences between themselves and middle class students and some lecturers. This led at times to a feeling of being the 'other' and not belonging. Paul articulates it in the following way:

I have felt isolated and ... self-conscious because I don't fit in just because of the age thing and I think like there is like a class issue as well. And this ability to communicate my ideas vocally when I'm sitting next to some of these people that's just I don't know whether it's to do with their education but I've sat next to lots of people who can pick their words off the shelf and are very, very articulate people. They're quite intimidating.

Class differences were also perceived and experienced by other adult students in terms of knowledge, dress and finance. In relation to 'employability' for the labour market inequalities were associated not only with class but also gender and age. They knew that the top companies targeted students at Warwick but were conscious that "... when it comes to what employers are looking for I don't think I'm it for a lot of them" (Paul). Many felt that, in Bourdieu's term, they lacked the cultural and social capital which employers want. Sharon realized the importance of the power of social and economic capitals which she lacks thus putting her at a disadvantage to the point of being discriminated against. She witnessed the younger middle class students using their social capital to get into the legal profession:

Some of the students I've spoken to, their parents are partners in solicitors so obviously they're going to walk into a job. Definitely down the barrister route it's about what private school you've been to. I think money definitely because if you haven't got the money you're not going to the bar. It costs too much money – £18,000 and £12,000 (cost of the Legal Practice course) for solicitors

and then books. I think it's more who you know as well as what university you're from.

Students are increasingly expected by employers to gain work experience but this is generally unpaid which working-class students cannot afford as they need to earn money during the university vacation nor can they travel outside their locality. Age was also a discriminatory factor:

Yes, at the end of this year I will have a degree but looking at my age and looking at the students – so many young students with the same degree as me when it comes to employment. Employers – maybe they will say – ‘Yes you have your degree expertise but your age’ and would rather be looking at someone younger than me. (Kate)

Family commitments also tie adults to a particular locality but graduate schemes do not make allowances for this:

Most of the graduate schemes that are available are for people without responsibilities. I can't go travelling and leave my son at home. There doesn't seem to be any niche for graduate schemes that are solely based locally. The jobs I've looked at they're looking for people that are flexible and are willing to work all the hours god sends and I have commitments. But that isn't taken into account for the mature student market. (Jane)

As a result of the inequalities and discrimination they experienced many of these adult students took a while to find a job and when they did it was not always at graduate level. Paul, for example, despite having obtained a first class degree in Politics (the highest UK classification) ended up going back to work as a roofer and finding himself in a precarious work situation as contracts are short term:

Like one person I'm working for he gets the contracts for the schools but what they'll do, like you finish one school and they'll say 'it might be in a few weeks' because they want to keep you hanging on ... Working in building you're pretty much on a zero hours contract. You won't get any holiday pay, no sick pay, if it's raining you won't get paid or if there's no work they'll just drop you.

Doing a politics degree politicized Paul and he analyzed his position through a critical Marxist lens. He had hoped to do a Masters' degree full-time after finishing his undergraduate degree but with having a family he felt that was out of the question financially. After a year, however, he was able to start a Masters' degree part-time while also trying to become self-employed as a roofer.

Although the above is a brief snapshot their voices illuminate how biographies are located in the past, present and future and within particular historical, social, political and economic contexts. Their individual stories highlight commonality between their experiences in their past lives, at university and in the labour market

as a result of the impact of inequalities on their biographies and in particular, class, gender and age. They illuminate the institutional barriers and inequalities of the UK higher education system and the graduate labour market. Yet at the same time while they are aware of these, their stories also show how they are able to use their agency, to varying degrees, to challenge this and find a path for themselves while also recognizing that the structural inequalities continue unchanged. As Thompson stresses biographical inquiry 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” (2000, p. 6).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Critical and feminist biographical methodology and radical adult education share similarities in their approaches as both place the interviewee/learner at the centre of the research/learning processes. Importantly they are concerned with challenging inequalities and oppression in society in a pursuit for social justice. Biographical inquiry is, therefore, more than just about a research method and as feminists and critical researchers remind us research is not neutral: it is political. Biographical interviewing is also a learning process for both the researcher and researched. Telling a story is potentially a powerful and transformative experience (Gouthro, 2014; Merrill & West, 2009) enabling a participant to reflect back on their life through a reflective and critical lens. For Stroobants “the interconnection of narrative and learning of both the research subjects and the researcher is an inherent feature of narrative biographical research” (2005, p. 48). Biographies and life histories can also be a critical learning tool in higher education and in other educational contexts as a means of raising critical discussion about inequalities in society. Such an approach sits in the tradition of Freire (1972) by learning through experience and ‘really useful knowledge’ (Johnson, 1988).

The social purpose of the university is currently being subsumed by the dominance of neo-liberalism and managerialism so it is becoming more important than ever for researchers and adult educators to keep a critical tradition and a social purpose agenda alive although the spaces for doing so are getting harder. In the UK we have largely lost this but as researchers and adult educators we need to, in the words of Raymond Williams (1980), find ‘resources for a ‘journey of hope’. Biographical inquiry which uses a critical, collaborative and egalitarian approach is one way of doing this.

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