Using Life History and Biographical Methodologies in Researching Adult and Lifelong Learning: Challenges and Achievements in Building a Global Conversation

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Introduction
The ‘turn’ to biographical methods has been popular in adult education research as well as the social sciences in general. In recent years in Europe, various conferences and, more recently, the editing of a European book have provided the opportunity (and challenge) of considering the current state of play in relation to the development of these methodologies. This partly concerns what such approaches may contribute to an understanding of adult and lifelong learning in diverse settings. They also provide an opportunity to develop conversations and understanding around the purpose of research as well as theoretical, disciplinary, paradigmatic, ideological and even terminological similarities, and differences, both within Europe and between continents. There is a diversity of intellectual traditions in Europe shaping research, including interpretivism, hermeneutics, social constructivism, symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical theory, narrative theory, psychoanalysis and psychosocial perspectives. While theoretical diversity enriches biographical research in adult education it can also raise challenges in understanding and communicating with each other locally and globally. This paper outlines and illustrates what has been termed ‘the turn’ to biographical approaches (we use ‘biography’ as an umbrella word for a family with many names: auto/biographical, life history and narrative research, for instance, each having some distinctiveness). We highlight, firstly, particular developments, especially in the study of adult and lifelong learning. Second, we delineate some of the ‘challenges’ in the family of biographical researchers: around language and disciplinary cultures as well as notions of objectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity in research, including the role of the researcher. Lastly, we describe how research is enriching our understanding of subjectivity, and of what it is to learn, in all its ‘psychosocial’ dimensions. This paper draws on the European context but uses this to broaden and extend the conversation to a global one in asking how far do our experiences resonate with those in Canada and North America and beyond?

The turn
The application of biographical approaches in social science - the “biographical turn” (Chamberlayne et al, 2000) - has been extensive and multidisciplinary. This may partly be a result of a reaction against approaches to research, which tended to marginalize or dismiss the perspectives of subjects. Social and educational behaviour, under the long durée of positivism, was perceived as essentially determined or predictable while subjective meaning was correspondingly considered inconsequential. Agency and human creativity, at both the collective as well as individual level, was relegated to a marginal status, beyond scientific rigour or interest. Contrary to this view, biographical researchers have emphasised how the social world is experienced and actively given meaning to, which can sometimes help change it (Chamberlayne et al, 2004).

However, biographical approaches are not a new phenomenon. They have existed as submerged streams in sociology, history, and even psychology, for decades. They reach back to studies of the French revolution and to the seminal contribution of Polish
researchers, such as Thomas and Znaniecki in their epic study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-20). This had considerable influence on the Chicago School and the development of biographical approaches in other national contexts.

Such approaches however, became marginalized as positivism took hold. The “turn”, or return, is partly due to the advent of a sophisticated body of feminist theory, in which learning, like politics, became personal. Partly it is due to the influence of postmodern epistemological perspectives and their hostility to meta-narratives and universalisms; and their celebration of difference, diverse subjectivities and the potential for human agency in different and particular contexts. The new focus on experience as a basis for research and learning also fits with elements of postmodernity, such as uncertainty, social and technological change. This is the territory in which ‘the self becomes a reflexive project’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 32). Giddens sees the globalising tendencies of the present as ushering in profound changes in social life and personal experience, which results in efforts to construct and sustain the self through narratives of self-identity. The shift from adult education to lifelong learning in policy discourse reflects some of these tendencies, as boundaries between learning and personal experience become increasingly difficult to draw, and learning is recognised as an important phenomenon in a wide variety of domestic, social and work-based, as well as educational settings (West, 2001; Edwards, 1997). Despite these trends, the pressure for highly instrumental and quantitative forms of research has not gone away. Such research serves the ‘needs’ of policy makers and managerial imperatives: what can be measured can be managed.

**The range of research**

The range of biographical research with regard to adult and lifelong learning is considerable. It includes research into experiences of learning - lifewide as well as lifelong - in higher and adult education (Alheit, 1994; Merrill, 1999); or processes of learning, subjectivity and professional identities in varied professional cultural milieu, such as medicine or in adult education itself (West, 2001; Salling Olesen, 2007; Dominicé, 2000). It includes learning in informal spaces, such as the family (West, 2007); the workplace (Salling Olesen, 2005); in community development settings (West, 2007); in trade union engagements (Weber, 1999) and even in cyberspace (Henwood et al, 2001).

Researchers are exploring the impact of learning in health and therapeutic processes, as well as resistance to particular forms of learning in the context of modernising imperatives (West, 2001; Andersen, 2007). Biographical researchers are examining the relationship between learning and gender (Ollagnier, 2003; Dybbroe, 2003) as well as learning, class and gender (Merrill, 1999). Some terminology varies and each approach may have a different emphasis and draws on varying philosophical, ideological or disciplinary sources. In some contexts, the terminology of biography and life history is used interchangeably. In others, distinctions are maintained. In Denmark, for instance, the notion of life history is distinguished from biography, which is the subjective expression of the way in which the author views a life (which may be his/her own life), rather than the life itself.

There is a diversity of intellectual traditions in such research: interpretivism, hermeneutics, social constructivism, symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical theory, narrative theory, psychoanalysis and psychosocial perspectives have been influential in different contexts. While this theoretical diversity can enrich biographical research, it can lead to profound differences around key issues: as in the relationship between researcher and researched; or around the notion of ‘data’ as ‘truth’. There are differences stemming from varied
assumptions about the nature of subjectivity and the status of the stories people tell. There is a tension between the notion of voice, especially with reference to marginalized peoples and what some see as a naively realist position in which stories are accepted, more or less at face value. The idea of the defended subject and story has been important here, where what is missing from accounts can be the most significant material (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Psychoanalytic ideas have been influential in challenging the supposed transparency of biographical texts: the stories we tell can be partial, edited, often unconsciously, and shaped by the specific encounter with the researcher and his/her identity, in what may be unconscious ways (Roper, 2003; West, 1996).

Challenges
Building conversations across such a European family can, sometimes, as suggested, be difficult. Language, as postmodernists remind us, is a powerful dimension of our identity and shapes our interactions with culture and others, and our understanding of the world. Working cross-nationally can help us to stand outside of national paradigms as we are introduced to new ideas and approaches, but we may also struggle to understand the other. Moreover, the fact of English being the prime medium of communication can induce frustration in communication as well as resentment: as in the Francophone world. Even key concepts such as adult student, higher education or access, which may seem straightforward, can be problematic as they are interpreted differently. Other concepts, for example class, may be considered less important in some countries. There are particular issues, as stated, between the Anglophone and Francophone worlds, where the literatures and conversations can sometimes be separate (although there can be similarities, with regard to feminism and the influence of psychodynamic perspectives) (Ollagnier, 2003).

Differences can also be epistemological. Researchers may be positioned at different points on a spectrum stretching from objectivism to subjectivism. This can surround differences of perception about the role and influence of the researcher in the generation of the research text. There can be differences too around the purpose of research: as social science or a kind of pedagogy for facing existential and professional as well as personal challenges (Dominicé, 2000). Or, echoing older themes - whether research exists to interpret the world, or change it.

Take the objectivist/subjectivist spectrum, as an example: the work of Alheit (1995), for instance, focuses on the organisation of social life in modernised societies (especially with reference to the life practice of adults). He suggests that the “theory of individualisation” (Beck, 1992) has sharpened the reflexive turn in adult education and brought the entirety of lives into the field of learning. The reconstruction of an individual life in modernised societies points to a new paradigm of learning, which has been labelled biographicity (Alheit, 1995). But Alheit takes a different view from feminist researchers in his approach to generating and interpreting life histories, building, in part, on the work of Schutze (1992). There is a clear and rigorous procedure laid down for generating and analysing life stories, which includes keeping the influence of the researcher to a minimum. There is a presumption that access to the truth of a life is more or less objectively possible, if standard and rigorous procedures are applied.

Feminists argue, however, that researchers fail to interrogate, sufficiently, how they generate their stories. There has been a presumption, as in the natural sciences, that theories and methods neutralise personal and political influences. Fine (1992) argues, instead, for the reflexive and self-reflexive potential of experience, in which the knower is part of the matrix of
what is known, and where the researcher needs to ask her/himself in what way has s/he shaped
the research process. The term ‘auto/biography’ is often used to draw attention to the inter-
relationship between the constructions of one’s own learning life history though
autobiography and the construction of the life of another through biography. The implication
is that we cannot write stories about ourselves without making reference to and hence
constructing others’ lives and selves, and those constructions we make of others in writing
their life histories contain and reflect our own histories and our social and cultural locations
(Miller, 2007; West, 2001). This includes the fact of the researcher being a member of a
particular discursive community, (sociologist, psychologist etc); as well as the interplay of
researcher and researched - as classed, raced and gendered beings - sometimes at an intimate
level (West et al, 2007). Auto/biographical perspectives seek to be more open and explicit
about the researcher’s influence. A search for inter-subjective understanding, rather than
traditional objectivist claims, characterise this approach.

**Adult Education and Biographical Research Across Europe**

To illustrate the diversity of biographical research, both in terms of discipline and subject
area, in European adult education we draw on brief examples from the ESREA biographical
book. Feminism has been influential in the development of biographical approaches to
research - particularly in the UK where research looks at the struggles which working class
women experience in returning to learn in further and higher education (Skeggs, 1997;
Merrill, 1999). Ollagnier (2007) inter-relates feminism, biography and learning in an
interesting way. She outlines the history of the women’s liberation movement in Geneva to
explore feminism as collective history through the narratives of six women. The process
became a learning one as the history of the women’s movement was considered alongside
its effects on the individuals involved:

> Our choice to do this kind of biographical work within a group, instead of doing it
through individual interviews, was a way of making sense of the collective dimension
and of relating this, in turn, to issues in feminist history (Ollagnier, 2007, p. 116).

In a different context Weber (2007) focuses on gender and the learning processes of adult
men training for work in the caring professions. Drawing on critical psychodynamic theory
she exposes learning in the workplace as a gendered battlefield where the learning subjects
change their basic subjective orientations and uses life histories to understand these
processes. Researching working life through life histories is prominent in the work of the
Lifelong Learning centre at Roskilde University in Denmark. Olesen (2007) uses a case
study approach to explore the learning of a professional identity among doctors (General
Practitioners). Andersen and Trojaborg (2007) examine the interplay between learning
environments in working life and the life history learning processes of employees by
focusing on office clerks.

Bron (2007) draws on her own life experience in her Polish background and of living in
Sweden to examine learning, language and transition. Her biographical research on adults
reveals how, for immigrants moving to another culture, such migrations can trigger culture
shock, the strength of which may depend on how distant a newcomer’s culture is from the
one left behind:

> Biographies are useful and analytical material providing insights into how identities
are shaped, changed and develop when facing a cultural transition. Life transitions
(emigration, career changes) where a new culture, a new language, and symbols as
well as meanings are involved, enrich and shape our lives again and again (Bron, 2007, p. 218).

Adult education biographical research is increasingly engaging with families and their learning. West (2007) looks at the role of family learning projects in creating or denying space for parents in marginalised communities to sustain themselves but also to talk back to power. West (2007) illuminates how vulnerable parents, especially women, can be supported and sustained but can also become more confident agents in shaping their own lives, individually and collectively, given a commitment to these processes by project staff:

The research sought to chronicle, illuminate and theorise the impact and meaning of programmes, and struggles for agency, through parents’ eyes, in the context of whole lives and life histories; rather than, as is more often the case, primarily from the perspectives of Government, policy makers and or the managers of programmes (West, 2007, p. 221).

Merrill (2007) argues for the recovery of class and the collective stories of adult learners. With the dominance of postmodernism social class became a neglected concept in sociology yet the life histories of working class adult students in further and higher education illustrate that social class is still central in everyday lives. Their stories connect the individual and the collective:

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate that biographies do not just help us to understand individual lives but are also an important tool for understanding shared experiences of the social world such as class and learning as an adult (Merrill, 2007, p. 71).

Dominicé (2007) explores how a life history approach can be used in the training of adult educators located in a diverse range of contexts and teaching different groups of adult students such as migrants, the elderly, the illiterate or women. In contrast Alheit and Dausien (2007) relate biography and lifelong learning and what they perceive to be the competitive dynamic between macro- and micro-levels of education. Narratives and learning are also now being used in relationship to therapy as Horsdal’s (2007) chapter illustrates by looking at how therapy can facilitate greater narrative integration of the past, present and future, which can be considered crucial in negotiating an identity but also in processes of learning.

**Conclusion**

The paper has examined the challenges and achievements of using biographical approaches in understanding adult and lifelong learning. The struggle to build and develop conversations and understanding across barriers of language, tradition, paradigmatic emphasis and ideology has been a learning process, in its own right. Broadly, we suggest, biographical and life history research reveals, in numerous and luminous ways, the complexity and range of adult and lifelong learning in Europe and the innovative approaches used both to chronicle and interpret this. Biographical approaches struggle with, but also challenge, boundaries of language, culture, academic disciplines, as well as, of self and other, while profound epistemological and methodological differences remain. Yet such approaches, as a whole, challenge dominant but reductive understandings of learning - its impact and meaning - in policy and even professional discourse. Finally, biographical research can mirror best practice in adult education, by creating a space in which people feel valued, understood and can better experiment with their stories as well as build some
narrative coherence and greater conceptual insight. Such a process represents a powerful form of learning in its own right.

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