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Stories Adult Learners Tell ... Recent Research on How and Why Adults Learn¹

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the current proliferation of research in the study of the education of adults that utilizes the biographical or life history approach.

Telling the story. The development of the life history method demonstrates that its popularity coincides with particular epistemological concerns within the sociology of knowledge which can be characterized as the social or cultural construction of knowledge, stemming from the Chicago School in the 1930s, to the symbolic interactionist/phenomenological perspectives that characterized the late 1960s, through to postmodernist ideas on what counts as research knowledge in the 1990s. At last year's 38th AERC, eight papers raised methodological issues that stem from this renewed focus on the narrative and the meta-narrative². In Britain, the proportion of conference papers at SCUTREA researching people's stories, the transformation of self and search for identity, located in socio-cultural contexts, has been significantly increasing since 1988 when the first two papers to focus specifically on the life history method as an 'alternative' research strategy were presented³. Within five years, this 'alternative' strategy had established itself sufficiently to be the major focus of the 1993 conference, at which a whole strand of the conference was devoted to biographies and autobiographies⁴. Since then between 15% and 20% of papers at SCUTREA conferences have presented research based on the so-called 'alternative' strategy. At last year's international conference in London, the majority of research-based papers were written from within the qualitative paradigm⁵. In Europe, there have been conferences focusing on the study of adult education through biography, and an electronic network for those engaged in this research.⁶

Beyond the narrative. Having established its significance, this paper seeks to explore reasons for the popularity. The paper argues that in these 'new times' the biographical method has particular value. It is no longer necessary to present an apology for this method of research, given the increasing demystification of the so-called 'scientific' approach to research, the critique of statistics as socially constructed, and the questioning of 'facts as things'⁷. It is recognized that scientists, no more nor less than others, are merely telling a story, which seeks to 'explain', but merely exposes the fruitless search for causes. There has been a shift from explanation to understanding, or what the nineteenth century social scientist, Max Weber, referred to as *verstehen*⁸. This rather more phenomenological task focuses on providing understandings, negotiating meanings or making sense. The method allows all those participating in the research (the researchers and the 'researched') to work together to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the narrative discourse that purports to 'explain', exposing for discussion meanings, multiple realities and cultural diversity in those narratives.

The life history is a research method that allows people to reintegrate the fragments of their lives and their selves through critical reflection on their lived experiences, restoring a sense of wholeness. Of course, this challenges conventional notions of social science research as the objective, value-free search for truth. The biographical approach to research is a dialectic that enables the development of understanding of human action through a mutual, democratic, participatory and educative practice.

Paradigm lost, paradigm regained. In the 1960s there was a significant paradigm shift in social science that eventually was to impact on the study of education and adult education. The ideology of positivism had been

dominant for almost as long as social science had existed, characterized in its endless quest for the Holy Grail – the ‘causes’ of human behavior. Yet social science had failed to deliver. The knowledge generated had little impact on society. For example, the positivist search for the cause for crime had ranged from Lombroso’s genetic theories about atavism through to more social explanations based on social class patterns in participation in crime. Policymakers were left uncertain as to whether the ‘solution’ to the problem of crime was to be found in genetic, psychological or social engineering. Social scientists had done little more than confirm the complexity of the nature-nurture debate, and the impossibility of monocausality.

Part of the reaction to this failure to explain the causes of crime or any human behavior was to develop the critique of the myth of ‘science’ on which social scientists had modeled their enterprise. Hypothetico-deductive empiricism was brought into question, both in terms of the axiomatic assumptions, logical positivism, and the possibilities of objective data collection, analysis and interpretation of evidence. After all, we do not all need to be trained scientists or even social scientists in order to act upon the world and sustain social order. We have our commonsense understandings and meanings that seem to get us through the day. This is not an argument in favor of naturalism, for it would appear that we do need a degree of socialization if this is to be effective. The social science task was no longer to explain why some people failed to be socialized, or engaged in delinquent or deviant behavior, or attended adult education classes. Rather, the new quest was to understand social order, and how it is socially constructed.

In the 1960s social scientists began to talk about the construction of multiple realities, interpreting diverse meanings, negotiating social and cultural identities and making sense. But more importantly, the paradigm shift celebrated research as a more participatory enterprise. This enabled some groups to break their silence. We began to listen to the voices from the margins.

Among many significant developments was the spread of feminism, which in turning the view of world upside down required a radically different approach to research: there was considerable unease in having to justify anti-patriarchy through the language, metaphors and research methodology of patriarchy. As I have argued elsewhere⁹, traditional social research methods reflect the ideology of nineteenth century western capitalism. Survey methods reflect the form of labor relations operating within the market economy, and interviewing can be seen as a ‘masculine practice’ treating interviewees as subordinates in a relationship characterized by hierarchy and reinforcing inequalities¹⁰. There was a need to develop alternative methodologies that do not distort the nature of social reality of women and challenge existing inequalities. The value of the life history method was recognized:

Firstly, story telling rejects the individualism of survey research. Social surveys encourage respondents to reduce their experiences to fragments that can be captured in a question-and-answer format. Stories, by contrast, provide a vehicle through which individual can build up and communicate the complexity of their lives. While surveys ‘tear individuals from their social context’, stories are pre-eminently ways of relating individuals and events to social contexts, ways of weaving personal experience into their social fabric. Secondly, stories provide a vehicle through which the existence and experiences of inequality can be explored ... Thirdly, stories do not demand that experiences and activities assume an object-form. Instead, stories illuminate the dynamic quality of experience, being themselves a process by which individuals make sense of past events and present circumstances ... Fourthly, story-telling offers the possibility of developing alternative systems of measurement, alternative ways of classifying the social world. It offers the possibility of rescuing women from the status of ‘non-data’ without forcing them to express their experiences through the ordinal and ratio scales favored by survey research.¹¹

Retrospectively, it is difficult to justify any claims through *this* story that with the shift in paradigm there was also a shift in power relations and equity. Power and inequality are not merely in the interactions between individuals or groups, but are structural, deeply rooted beneath the surface, and it would require consciousness raising of class, gender or ethnic inequalities on a vast scale to bring about significant social, cultural and economic change. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift did raise awareness of the nature and extent of power and inequality, and the

dominance of ideology and hegemony, which is an important early step in the process of social and cultural transformation.

Stories adult learners tell. The analysis in this paper is focused on the study of how and why adults learn. Whilst the implications are far broader for socio-cultural, even historical research, the arguments are illustrated through the theorization of the literature on adult learning. There are two major reasons for this. The first is that an analysis of existing research on adult learning demonstrates the significance not just of the sociology of knowledge, but the very important contribution of feminist theory to research methodology, which has given the methodology its authenticity. The second reason is that the author is currently engaged in a research project seeking to describe and analyze the distinctive nature of teaching and learning in the context of mature adults studying part-time in higher education. This research, re-theorizing the notion of experience and its relation to learning, is utilizing the biographical approach, on the grounds that this is the only methodology that can generate authentic evidence needed to re-theorize experience and learning. Examples drawn from this research will be used at the conference to illustrate the theme of this paper.

Recently published research gives us an indication of the nature of these stories. Lunneborg¹² presents the stories of fourteen women who turned their lives upside down by studying for a degree with the Open University. Whilst the emphasis is on how they succeeded in gaining a degree, these are heroic tales insofar as the women in their twenties to forties were bored, stagnating and frustrated, trapped at home or in unrewarding employment. West's research¹³ over a period of three years generated stories from 30 adult learners who turned to or returned to higher education in Kent, in England. The book tells us the stories of those adult learners. In reviewing the book¹⁴ I wrote:

We are presented with the new Canterbury Tales of our age: Kathy the Clerk (who wanted to be a solicitor), Brenda the Housewife, Paul the Builder, Alan the Docker (who would all rather be teachers), Brian the Business Entrepreneur, Jim the Painter and Decorator (who wanted to be a radiographer), June the Casino Courier, Hilary the Nurse, Pamela the Lover, Sian the Secretary, Christine the Mother, Apoorv the Hindu, Shazir the Stranger. These tales are not fables, but fragments of British culture and history located in a region in the extreme south-east of England. The tales are those of pilgrims on the road in search of an identity and the restoration of self-esteem. We come to know not only the person, but also their families (or their significant others), their crises, their search for an identity in order to re-integrate their fragmented lives. The commonality rests not only in their search but also in the coming back to education, to access higher education at a turning point in their lives.

The story told. The stories these adult learners told are intended to be about their motivation to return to learning. There is an extensive literature available¹⁵ to adult educators interested in finding out 'why', as West himself recognizes at the beginning of his study. In Britain, at this time, there is expressed concern for widening participation in lifelong learning¹⁶, and one of the many keys needed to unlock the learning society is an understanding of why adults might want to learn. Are these stories of those on the educational path significantly different from those choosing alternative routes - religion, drug-induced experiences, psychotherapy, relationships (these are not mutually exclusive)? It would be unrealistic to expect West to have taken on a comparative approach to his research and gone beyond the fragment that is education. His research offers a way, *one* way, of making sense of the past, the future and the present, the ebb and flow between the self and social, cultural, political and economic context, the constant process of reconstruction of experience and changing narratives. If the alternative is the kind of survey research undertaken by NIACE/Gallup¹⁷, which concludes, after surveying nearly 5000 adults (17 and over) in the United Kingdom that there are essentially two groups – those that will (the 'learning rich'), and those that will not (the 'learning poor') 'accept the invitation to participate in the learning society', then West's research demonstrates that his approach offers a 'powerful and natural resource to be used to understand other's life stories'. Whilst the survey can tell us about social class (disproportionately middle class), gender (more men than women),

age (younger than older), employment status (those working are twice more likely to participate), nationality¹⁸ (those in England more likely to be engaged in learning than Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland), their future intentions (the population is less likely to participate in future), and what subjects they study, such research cannot tell us why. We can detect something about motivation, and suspect that participation in learning is related to major life changes (promotion at work, moving house, getting married or marital breakdown), but such research just leaves us asking more questions. There are data on 'reasons' for participation - the closed questions in the survey offer ten optional responses, of which seven are work-related. Of course, the life story and the survey are not 'alternatives', they are telling different stories, in different ways, by different storytellers.

The storyteller. One of the many differences between the NIACE survey and West's research is that we know very little about those who chose to respond in the affirmative to the Department for Education and Employment's request for a survey on participation in adult learning, to find out about adult learners' motivation, their reasons for choosing their methodology, sampling decisions, categorizations and classifications, focus of analysis, and styles of reporting except through inference or personal knowledge of one or more of the researchers. However, the use of the biography recognizes the inseparability of the story told and the storyteller. As critical readers, we also need to know the storyteller and certainly West's own story runs through the book as a meta-narrative providing a vital frame for the analysis and interpretation represented in the narratives themselves. Some would argue that this is precisely the problem with biographical research – it is also autobiography. In *Through the joy of learning*, the 'editors'¹⁹ tell their story in the introduction to a series of extracts from around 400 diaries kept by adult learners. In the afterword, they reflect on their responsibilities as researchers working with the diaries.

Implications for the development of adult education and practice. Fieldhouse, an historian of British adult education, has commented that 'the present enthusiasm for life histories' among adult education researchers is in danger of 'obscuring the big picture and policy studies with fine, meaningless details'²⁰. Coare and Thomson²¹ would want to challenge this view, arguing that qualitative data of this nature can

illuminate the lived experience of the institutions, structures and relationships of education. Personal accounts evoke the myriad, complex motivations for participation in learning, they record the factors which make it difficult for people to participate in and benefit from education, and how these factors change throughout people's lives, they reveal what forms and processes of education work, and sometimes don't work, for men and women, and they show what adults can get out of learning, for themselves, their families and communities.

Indeed, the 'big picture' is 'fine and meaningless' without this rich detail of people's lives.

In thinking about the importance of this research for teachers of adults, there is a parallel response. Some may ask, why do we need to know? Isn't this an intrusion into people's lives that we don't really need to know about as teachers? Teachers of adults do not always have a curiosity about the lives - biographies, cultures, selves - that adult students bring with them into their classes. Indeed, some of teachers explicitly expect students to leave these 'private' selves at the door, as they themselves do (a characteristic of professionalism of teachers is not to give too much a way about who *they* are, except as teachers). However, the argument is that it is important for teachers of adults, if not to get to know the intimate details of their student lives, then to find ways to encourage students to be prepared to critically reflect on, give meaning to, and learn through, their own lived experiences. Without an awareness of *whom* the students are, *why* there want to learn at this particular moment in their lives, and *how* they learn, then teaching cannot be effective:

Immediately our simplified analyses of student motivation for studying, our categorisations (vocational versus academic or learning for leisure) are blown

apart. We may not *know* Sian, but there she is in our class, except she is called Cloe the Clerk or Rachel the Receptionist, struggling but determined to succeed, balancing domestic responsibilities, child care commitments, work requirements, and a desire for change and improvement, to overcome the barriers and constraints imposed through past experiences. Suddenly, our advice on time management or the management of change seems embarrassingly simplistic, patronising and naïve²².

Moreover, I would argue, this requires that we know more about who the teachers of adults are. In the same way that we cannot understand the stories adult learners tell without some awareness of the researchers' own stories, we also need to listen to the stories of both adult learners and the teachers of adults. In other words, we need more stories the teachers of adults tell, more research on how and why teachers of adults teach²³.

1 This paper is based on an event I organized as part of the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education's National Adult Learners' Week 19-25 May 1997, at Birkbeck College, University of London. My thanks to the contributors: Avtar Brah, Pam Coare, Laurie Taylor and Linden West.

2 See papers by Brooks and Edwards, Grace Kaufmann, Lawrence, Nelson, Reybould, Sparks and Tisdell and Perry in R. E. Nolan and H. Chelesvig (eds.), *Conference Proceedings of the 38th Annual Adult Education Research Conference*, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1997

3 M. Finger (1988), Hermeneutics, critical theory and the biographical method as an alternative in adult education research (pp. 166-171), and P. Jarvis (1988), Needs, interests and adult learning (pp. 200-205), both in M. Zukas (ed.), *TransAtlantic Dialogue: a research exchange*, Leeds: SCUTREA

4 N. Miller and D. Jones (eds.) (1993), *Research: reflecting practice. Proceedings from the 23rd Annual SCUTREA Conference*, Manchester: SCUTREA

5 P. Armstrong, N. Miller and M. Zukas (eds.) (1997), *Crossing borders, breaking boundaries: research in the education of adults*; Proceedings of the 27th Annual SCUTREA Conference, London: Birkbeck College

6 Centre for Continuing Education, University of Sussex, *Life histories and learning: language, the self and education. Papers from an interdisciplinary conference*, Brighton, UK, September 1994; European Society for Research in the Education of Adults, Seminary on Life History and Biographical Research, Geneva, March 1993

7 There is an extensive literature on this debate; see J-F Lyotard (1984), *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, for the postmodern perspective

8 M. Weber (1949), *The methodology of the social sciences* (ed. E. Shils), Glencoe: Free Press

9 P. Armstrong (1987), *Qualitative strategies in social and educational research: the life history method in theory and practice*. Newland Papers no. 14, University of Hull, pp. 14-16

10 Ann Oakley (1981), Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (ed.), *Doing feminist research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 41

11 Hilary Graham, cited in Armstrong (1987), op. cit.

12 Patricia W. Lunneborg (1994), *OU women: undoing educational obstacles*, London: Cassell

13 L. West (1996), *Beyond the fragments: adults, motivation and higher education: a biographical analysis*, London: Taylor and Francis

14 P. Armstrong (1997), Review of *Beyond the fragments: adults, motivation and higher education: a biographical analysis* by Linden West. In *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 466-467

15 A succinct overview of the relevant literature is provided in P. Jarvis (1995), *Adult and continuing education: theory and practice*, London: Routledge, 2nd. ed., pp. 50-53

16 T. Uden (1996), *Widening participation: routes to a learning society*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education.

17 N. Sargant, J. Field, H. Francis, T. Schuller and A. Tuckett (1997), *The learning divide: a study of participation in adult learning in the United Kingdom*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education.

18 Although the survey invited respondents to identify their ethnicity there are no data on ethnicity included in the data analysis and report. An earlier survey by Sargant (1993), *Learning for a purpose* (Leicester: NIACE) had mapped participation 'among the main minority ethnic groups since overall population surveys do not provide large enough samples of minority ethnic communities for further analysis' (Sargant et al. (1997), op. cit., p.8).

19 P. Coare and A. Thomson (eds.) (1996), *Through the joy of learning: diary of 1,000 adult learners*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education, pp. vii-viii, and 201-205

20 R. Fieldhouse (1996), Mythmaking and Mortmain: a response. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, vol. 28, no. 1, April, p. 119

21 Coare and Thomson (1996), op. cit., p. 201

22 Armstrong (1997), op. cit. p. 467

23 Such stories already exist of teachers in other sectors, as found in D. Thomas (ed.) (1997), *Teachers' stories*, Buckingham: Open University Press, and in the biographies and autobiographies of distinguished adult educators.