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Using Biographical Research (or is it Auto/Biography?) to Illuminate Adult and Lifelong Learning: Contested and Illuminating Space

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Abstract: This paper illustrates ‘the turn’ to biographical approaches in the study of adult learning and considers some contested issues in this ‘family’ of approaches. Especial attention is paid to issues of subjectivity and objectivity and the role of the researcher in shaping the subject (s) of her enquiry. However, the paper concludes by suggesting that, whatever the differences, such approaches offer unique and more holistic insights into the complexities of learning, lifewide and lifelong.

Introduction

The turn to biographical approaches in social science, and the study of adult and lifelong learning, has become pronounced in recent years (Chamberlayne et al, 2000; West et al, 2007). There have been several conferences, under the auspices of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA), with increasing numbers of researchers using such approaches, in diverse contexts, leading to a new book (West et al, 2007). The book builds on an earlier publication, which chronicled the re-emergence of biographical methods in Europe in the early 1990s (Alheit et al, 1995). There is evidence of an increased popularity of similar methods in North America, (see, for example, Sork, Chapman and Sinclair, 2000), drawing, in part, on feminism and the application of oral, life history and narrative approaches among marginalized peoples (Plummer, 2001). Feminist, black, North American First Nation and gay consciousness movements have enabled more people to chronicle their own experiences, on more of their own terms, and to challenge myths projected on to them by powerful others, including experiences of learning and education (Plummer, 2001).

These developments, with particular reference to Europe, provide an opportunity to reflect on the current state of theory and practice in this methodological ‘family’. There are many similarities, despite different terms used – biography, life history, life writing, auto/biography, narrative etc – not least the historic influence of the Chicago School, social constructivism, symbolic interactionism, and to an extent feminism and oral history. But as in all families, there are differences too, some quite strong. In particular, surrounding the assumed ‘objectivity’ of research or the extent to which interview and narrative material represent the ‘truth’ of a life, or of learning, in a realist sense. Differences of language, disciplinary backgrounds and academic cultures, as well as epistemological and methodological assumptions, can be detected. Notwithstanding, the range and depth of work is impressive while disciplinary boundaries are to an extent being transcended, as in the emergence of psychosocial perspectives (West et al, 2007). Using biographical approaches challenges comfortable disciplinary assumptions: there is a need to conceptualise learning, like life histories as a whole, in more holistic and dynamic ways; as situated, relational, embodied, social, psychological, historic, lifelong and lifewide at one and the same time.

This paper illustrates aspects of ‘the turn’ to biographical approaches (‘biography’ is used, for present purposes, as an umbrella word for a family with many names, as indicated above, each having some distinctiveness). It highlights particular developments in Europe before

delineating how the space is contested: around notions of objectivity or subjectivity in research as well as surrounding the role of the researcher.

Nothing New

Biographical approaches, however, are not new in social science or in the study of history. 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 diverse national contexts. A strong theoretical influence in Chicago school sociology was symbolic interactionism, which regarded the things that the members of society do as being performed by them, as actors, rather than by the system, in some abstract sense, itself. The social order (including in educational contexts) is created in, through and from the interactions of members of society. Biographical researchers, of whatever kind, tend to take that as axiomatic (West et al, 2007).

Other Influences

Such perspectives, however, became marginalized as positivism took hold, especially in psychology but also sociology as social psychology formed its own distinct discipline. The “turn”, or re-turn, is partly due of the advent of a sophisticated body of feminist theory, in which learning, like politics, became personal. Feminism was, arguably, the decisive influence in the United Kingdom, as it was in France (West et al, 2007), although less so in some other continental traditions. It has been influential in Denmark, not least when combined with critical theory in the study of subjectivity, working life and learning. This includes chronicling the different and highly gendered responses to training programmes in care settings, with men tending to seek recognition of their autonomy, before coping with intimacy, mirroring, perhaps, patterns in earlier experience. To the extent that socialization patterns make themselves known in everyday life, men, it seems, tend to need autonomy as a precondition for intimacy, whereas women strive to establish intimacy – and perhaps recognition – as a precondition for demonstrating autonomy in learning (Weber, 2007)).

Feminism has also been concerned with the pervasive influence of gender in people’s lives, including in learning, and the power of phallogentric language to construct subjects, and learning, in particular ways. Moreover, feminist research was increasingly presented and celebrated as a participatory enterprise in the study of adult and lifelong learning (Armstrong, 1998). There was commitment to giving voice to women previously hidden in research. Feminism similarly challenged the practice of treating interviewees as subordinates as researchers sought to build more equal relationships between interviewers and interviewees. The process of interviewing became central to the method, while research was conceived as a self-learning experience for the interviewer, in its own right. Feminist researchers tend to view interviewees as collaborators. Participants can be involved in the analysis of texts while researchers may involve participants dialogically in the process by, for example, sending them a copy of their transcript to ensure that they feel that it is an accurate representation of what they said. Some researchers provide feedback of research findings to interviewees in a further attempt to build shared understanding in a collaborative, trusting, empowering as well as an iterative process (Merrill, 1999; West, 2007).

Postmodern epistemological perspectives have also been influential in their hostility to meta-narratives and universalisms; in their celebration of difference, diverse subjectivities and

the potential for human agency in a variety of contexts. A renewed focus on lived experience as a basis for research also fits with elements of late or postmodernity, such as uncertainty, social and technological change, which are proving influential in theorising learning in terms of reflexivity. 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 intimate, domestic, social and work-based, as well as educational settings (West et al., 2007).

And partly, as least in the United Kingdom, oral history has played an important role in the field, not least with referenced to human agency. The British social historian Edward Thompson placed this at the core of historical processes. Class, for instance, was not so much a structure, nor even a category, but something that is made in (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships. Class is embodied in real people in real contexts: ‘the finest meshed sociological net’, Thompson insisted, ‘cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love’ (Thompson, 1980, p 8). You cannot have love, Thompson argued, without lovers or deference without squires and labourers, or learning without learners. Class happens when some men and women, as a result of common experiences (shared, inherited and even imagined), feel and articulate – to which we would add reflexively ‘learn’ – some identity of interest in comparison to another group. How people actively ‘learn’ their world, and their place in it, as well as how this can change, lies at the heart of much biographical research endeavour.

One further element in the rise of biographical approaches in the United Kingdom was a reaction against the dominance of survey methods in studying adult learning, which could easily neglect the complexity of learners’ narratives by seeking to freeze experiences into crude categories. For instance, there was a tendency to distinguish between ‘vocational’ and ‘non-vocational’ motivation in learning – work related or personal - which seemed to unravel given that vocational motives could be rooted in deeply personal issues, for example, as illuminated by in-depth biographical research (West, 1996).

However, despite these trends, the pressure for highly instrumental and quantitative forms of research – in which subjective meanings are largely excluded - has not gone away. Such research serves the ‘needs’ of policy makers and managerialist imperatives. In North America, biographical approaches may also continue to struggle against a very strong objectivist/empiricist grain in the study of adult and lifelong learning. Not everyone may be moving in the same direction.

The Range of Research

The range of current biographical research with regard to adult and lifelong learning is considerable. There are studies of experiences of learning in higher and adult education; research into processes of learning, the construction of subjectivity and the making of professional identities in health and medicine; and of learning in professional adult education programmes. It includes learning in informal spaces, such as the family, the workplace; in community development and social activism; and even in cyberspace. Researchers are exploring the place and meaning of learning in therapeutic processes, and examining the relationship between learning, class and gender (Merrill, 1999; West et al., 2007). The terminology, as observed, can

vary. In Denmark, for instance, the notion of life history is distinguished from (auto)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 common interest across the research family in the synergies, or lack of them, between incidental, non-formal and formal learning, across and within lives (West et al., 2007)

There is a diversity of intellectual traditions at work too: interpretivism, hermeneutics, social constructivism, symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical theory, narrative theory, psychoanalysis and psychosocial perspectives have all been influential in particular contexts. While this theoretical diversity enriches biographical research, it can lead to profound differences around key issues: around the notion of 'data' as the 'truth' of a life; or surrounding the relationship between researcher and researched and the extent to which objectivity is seen as desirable or attainable. There is tension, too, around the authority of voice, especially with reference to marginalized peoples: some see there to be a naively realist position in which stories are accepted, more or less at face value, in a democratic and empowering spirit. Psychoanalytic ideas have been influential in challenging the supposed transparency of stories, suggesting instead that the stories we tell may be partial, edited, often unconsciously, and shaped by the specific encounter with the researcher, including in unconscious ways (Roper, 2002; West, 1996). Stories rather than simply being a means to sculpt a narrative identity can be a cover for something that is deep, complex and even threatening. The idea of the defended subject and story, where what is missing can be the most important material, expresses these different perceptions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Sclater, 2003)

Contested Space: Auto/biography

There are other epistemological and methodological debates. There may be differences over the purposes of research: is it social science or a kind of pedagogy for facing existential and professional as well as personal challenges? There are tensions between those seeking more sociological forms of explanation – in which the search for social types or categories is a prime objective – and those who are suspicious of forcing people and their learning into categories in ways that can violate the subtlety and nuance of individual learning lives. This is a part of a broader tension in documenting lives (Plummer, 2001). Researchers may also position themselves at different points on an objectivist/subjectivist spectrum. 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” 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 (West et al, 2007). Yet Alheit, like some other German researchers (Rosenthal, 2003) positions himself in objectivist terms, in comparison to feminist researchers, for instance. He draws, in part, on the work of Schutze (2002), where a clear and rigorous procedure is 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 to achieve a more ‘objective hermeneutics’.

Other researchers give more emphasis to the influence of the researcher in the construction of research and stress that her subjectivity can be a resource rather than an obstacle in enquiry. Notions of auto/biography, (with a ‘/’ or slash), take us into this more dynamic, intersubjective territory. Attention is drawn to the inter-relationship between the construction of one’s own life through autobiography and the construction of the life of another through

biography. We cannot, it is suggested, 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 social and cultural location (Miller, 2007). Feminists have long argued 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. But the knower, from feminist perspectives, is part of the matrix of what is known and researchers need to ask themselves in what ways they have shaped the research. 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 (West et al, 2007), alongside unconscious processes – in the research encounter (Roper, 2003). It is not that some reflexive struggle for objectivity is undesirable in research, rather that we need to be more honest, open and reflexive about all aspects of what it means to do research and make meaning with another.

Recent in-depth research on families and their learning illustrates the importance of auto/biographical perspectives. The research has been based in various marginalized communities in the United Kingdom and involved working, longitudinally, with vulnerable families in programmes such as Sure Start (modelled on the American Head Start programme). These programmes have substantial elements of adult, family and informal learning but are also highly contested (are they for disciplining or empowering the marginal other?) (West & Carlson, 2006). Some of the biographical material generated was deeply painful: as in the case of two parents named Jo and Heidi. They were abandoned by parents and suffered horrific histories of abuse by authority figures, in both intimate and more public settings. They were highly suspicious of professionals in programmes, and of the researchers, and yet, over time, learned to trust particular workers, and the research. And they made use of diverse opportunities for informal learning and access to specialist psychological services. The research illuminated the sustaining role of learning in such lives, which was not to be viewed simply in individualistic terms but also as part of strengthening the social fabric and even enabling such parents to talk back to power (West & Carlson, 2006). The researchers reflected, in depth, auto/biographically, on what was involved in working with such parents. Partly the process taught humility, in how people learn to cope with distressing personal histories, for instance, and the researchers contrasted this resilience with deficit models of families and communities. The researchers also felt it necessary to share with each other aspects of family histories, as feelings of inadequacy as parents surfaced in listening to others' stories. This included, for one of the researchers, a neglect of family life as well as a divorce, and associated guilt at abandoning children. The researchers describe sitting in a car quietly after interviews and reliving the material and exploring its auto/biographical resonance. All the material was recorded in field notes, as a way of embodying the auto/biographical, meaning making process in which researchers draw on their experience to make sense of other's lives and vice versa. Yet these intersubjective aspects are often absent from the text while processes of interpretation are represented as largely disembodied, one-directional, cerebral affairs, under the gaze, presumably, of objectivism.

Findings: The Holistic Complexities of Adult Learning

New and profound insights into adult learning are being generated in such research. Psychosocial perspectives – drawing on depth psychology, feminism, history as well as sociology – are exposing the limitations of some conventional academic demarcations. On the

one hand, impulses, anxieties, wishes and contradictory desires are structured and restructured by our immersion in the social order. But psyche, in this view, is far from epiphenomenal: we have the opportunity to become more active subjects and authors of our lives, but may actively resist this, because of anxiety about being found wanting or unlovable, for instance. Drawing on the clinical work of Klein and others (West, 2007), anxiety about learning may be considered fundamental to the human condition but this is to be understood within a wider social context. There is also movement in such research beyond traditional ideas of the rational, coherent and autonomous subject of adult learning - with identity as a relatively stable consciousness of one's position in a social context – to ways of understanding subjectivity as psychological, social, relational, but also dynamic, embodied, and defended. There is movement too beyond traditional dichotomies in learning: the social versus the individual, for instance. Or beyond linear stage theories of adult development, which tend to derive from the privileging of a male view of self-actualisation and independence of thought. Our need for others, and relationship, and the idea of selfhood grounded in emotionality and embodiedness as well as the quality of our interactions, had been pushed to the conceptual margins but auto/biographical research helps bring such neglected dimensions of learning, and of being a subject in learning, into focus and a potentially richer conceptual frame.

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