



Life history methodology: “narradigm” regained

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Biographies, life histories and other modes of narrative research enjoy increasing popularity as an alternate research genre. However, its status as a legitimate research methodology continues to be challenged by the positivist/empiricist tradition with its artificial dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. This paper critically explores some of the joys and perils of narrative research and its value for educational research in general. In proposing biographical research as a counterculture to traditional methods, this paper examines the potential of biographies in understanding the lives of educators.

Preamble

Debates around life history methodology slide imperceptibly into questions which challenge its legitimacy as a research genre in relation to the methodologically enfranchised empiricist tradition. There are three possible approaches to answering some of the questions that frequently emerge on the relative status of narrative research.

The *first* approach is *not to answer* the questions at all. Now, evading the question may seem anachronistic, but, as soon as we attempt to answer the question, we lend legitimacy to the artificial dichotomy between empiricist research as the apparent standard bearer, in relation to other research genres. But rejecting these questions would smack of the same kind of intellectual arrogance often exhibited by empiricists. I will therefore resist the temptation to dismiss these questions unceremoniously. The *second* approach involves *aggressively extolling* the virtues of narrative research, at the risk of becoming an apologist for its legitimacy as an alternative research genre, and in the process reaffirming the dominance of the empirical tradition. The *third* approach is to *propose* life history methodology as a *counterculture*, particularly to those who are weary of variables, and to critically examine some of its limitations and hazards, particularly in the context of research into teacher biographies. This paper attempts to address some of the concerns, questions and comments which emerged out of a seminar I recently presented at the University of Durban – Westville (South Africa) on the theme: *Teacher biographies: Methodological strategies and dilemmas*. I therefore want to adopt the third approach identified above by examining some of the contemporary work being done in the field of narrative research and examine its contribution to educational research.

Life history and the empirical tradition: dichotomous or complimentary

Without getting embroiled in the quirks of postmodernist research, let me say at the outset that I see no dichotomy between life history methodology and the empirical tradition. Yes, life/oral histories do prefigure a challenge to traditional conceptions of epistemology. They do challenge the fetishness about the certainty and objectivity of

knowledge and the quest for universal truths. This is because it is a truism that individual experiences are inherently political and deeply embedded in relations of power. And it is also true that traditional epistemology has largely ignored this. My intention here is not to suggest that artistic approaches to research should displace scientific enquiry. I am suggesting that we need to promote “methodological pluralism rather than methodological monoism” (Eisner, 1981, p. 9). I do not see any inherent conflict between qualitative and non-qualitative approaches. Instead, I agree with Eisner who proposes that in educational research

... it is to the artistic to which we must turn, ... as a rejection of the scientific, but because with both we can achieve binocular vision. Looking through one eye never did provide much depth of field. (ibid.)

Despite the “depth of field” narratives offer the world of research, one of the most enduring critiques against narrative research revolves around the epistemological significance of life histories. Eisner (1981) argues that education must go beyond both the empirical-analytical and historical-hermeneutic to become a form of acquired self-knowledge. By making individuals more consciously aware of the social and ideological roots of their self-understanding, they are able to alter, reject, or make more secure their tentative views of the world. Educational research has to focus on the self as a living contradiction. It should acknowledge the essential fallibility of human beings, and empower individuals to theorize about their own professional practice as they attempt to improve the quality of their own and others’ learning.

Life history: an articulate voice, an authentic lens

Autobiography, biography and other forms of life history, each dedicated to the significance of individual experience, have become increasingly popular methods in educational enquiry. As a theory of cognition, narrative has important implications for teaching and learning at all levels of education. Yet, it “is rare to find an account of biography and life history methodology that does not display a defensive tone” (Weiland, 1995, p. 99). It is not my intention here to rationalize or provide legitimacy for what I consider to be a refreshing addition to a kaleidoscope of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Rather, I want to endorse what Lawrence Cremin (1976, in Weiland, 1995, p. 99) said nearly 20 years ago:

Individuals come to educational situations with their own temperaments, histories, and purposes, and different individuals will obviously interact with a given configuration of Education in different ways and with different outcomes.

I want to suggest boldly, therefore, that the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world.

Biographies fall in the broad genre of narrative research which, in the words of Casey (1995, p. 235), “confirm the arrival of a post-paradigmatic age” – an age that seeks to affirm and actively sponsor the voices of the teacher, the teacher educator, and the student; voices that have long been absent from educational research and policy. While the notion of “post-paradigm” is problematic in that it constitutes a paradigm in itself, studying teacher educators’ lives through narrative research enables us to reconceptualize our studies of teaching and curriculum in fundamentally different ways. I want to coin this alternate lens as a “*Narradigm*”. The notion of a “*Narradigm*” affirms

the reality that our lives are intrinsically narrative in quality. We experience the world and re-present our experience narratively. Biographies and other forms of life writing enables the reconstruction and interpretation of subjectively meaningful features and critical episodes of a teacher educator's life, allowing us to see the unities, continuities, and discontinuities, images and rhythms (Cortazzi, 1993, pp. 5–9). Without this new way of seeing the teacher, our insight into how teachers develop can only be myopic.

The importance of educators' biographies or professional lives is being acknowledged by several educationists (see, e.g., Belenky et al., 1986; Casey, 1995, Calderhead & Gates, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Goodson, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Witherall & Noddings, 1991). As a theoretical approach, Kelchtermans (1993, pp. 443–456) characterizes the biographic perspective as having five general features. It is “narrative, constructivistic, contextualistic, interactionistic, and dynamic.”

The *narrative* element refers to the subjective, narrative form in which educators present their career experiences. The focus is not on the factual accuracy of the story constructed, but on the meaning it has for the respondent. In this regard, the approach is also *constructivistic* since the story is a composition of construed meanings and self-representations (Ball & Goodson, 1986). Markus & Wurf (1987, in Kelchtermans, 1993), emphasize that the self-concept is not a monolithic entity but rather a collection of different types of self-representations. Since one never has access to the complete set of representations of oneself, Markus and Wurf see the term “working self – concept or self-concept of the moment” as “a continually shifting array of accessible self knowledge”. The authors further assert that we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of “Narrative configuration” (ibid.), and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding story. There is no formula for representing the configuration in a particular life, only the interests and point of view of the biographer. Biographers achieve this configuration by crossing disciplinary boundaries, allowing a number of disciplines to converge, while each discipline maintains its own integrity. For example, Huberman (1993) who foregrounds the psychological discipline, embeds his stage model of teacher development in a sociological analysis of how educators change. Labov (1981, in Cortazzi, 1993, p. 14), on the other hand, “collaborate(s) from linguistic and psychotherapeutic backgrounds.”

In another sense, the postmodern age can be confusing and chaotic. Hargreaves (1993, p. 96), argues that the plurality and diversity of different voices can create a “cacophony of fragmented and dissonant perspectives and desires.” Instead of a wealth and plurality of insight and perception, “we can become trapped within an autistic culture of miscommunication and misunderstanding; a culture with no hope of consensus, community or common ground” (ibid.). Moreover, narrative research emphasizes personal stories and narratives, the intensely individual nature of each person's experience and people constantly remaking themselves as an active, ongoing social project. This can divert attention from the ways in which apparently the inheritances of history and the systematic influences of economics, politics, and bureaucracy subtly structure diverse experiences. This structured neglect has implications for the contemporary practice and study of teacher development, which is becoming overly focused on teachers' stories and narratives of the personal practical, to the exclusion of issues and experiences that are deeply embedded in a world that is also social, political, and historical (see Hargreaves, 1993).

It is crucial therefore that biography be located in a larger tapestry of individual, community, and institutional enquiry. Without a clear focus on this contextual

intersection of life in relation to history, social science, education, feminist, and minority perspectives, writing biographies are indeed trivial pursuits.

In a narrative discourse, therefore, events are always presented in their *context*. Context that refers to the physical, institutional environment as well as the social, cultural, and interpersonal environment includes significant others such as parents, mentors, colleagues, and peers. The interpersonal context provides both powerful positive and negative influences that shape an educator's practice. The institutional context, which manifests itself through the education system, its organizational and bureaucratic structures, roles and relationships also significantly influences an educator's practice and career phases (Huberman, 1993).

Since human behaviour always results from a meaningful interaction with the social and cultural environment and with other actors, biography may be said to be *interactionistic* (Kelchtermans, 1993). Clandinin and Connelly (1996) argue that storytelling is the organizing principle in educators' lives, a principle by which they organize their experience and knowledge about the social world. It is the "primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful.... People are story telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 5, 7). Goodson (1992, p. 241) adds, "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity." When people tell stories, anecdotes, and other kinds of narratives, they are engaged in "a perceptual activity that organises data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience" (Bruner, 1990, in Cortazzi, 1993, p. 19). The study of narrative is therefore the study of the ways in which humans experience the world.

The *dynamic* element (Kelchtermans, 1993), explores another core element of the biographical approach: the temporal dimension and the developmental dynamic. "Educators' actual thinking and acting, constitutes one moment, a fragment in the continuous process of assigning meaning to the perceived and experienced reality" (ibid., p. 444). Biography presents rich opportunities for individuals to re-examine and reconstruct their own perceptions of personal experience. In the Derridean sense, biography becomes a type of architecture, a vast array of impulses, instincts, memories, and dreams – visualized, theorized and told as a story. Biography takes this task seriously, as it is the task of self-formation, deformation, learning, and unlearning.

My purpose in the preceding discussion was to demonstrate that life history methodology has its own sophisticated organizing principles. Contrary to the belief amongst empiricists that with life history research "anything goes," I want to assert that while narrative research challenges the canon imposed by propositional discourse, it is not a laissez-faire indulgence. While these organizing principles cannot and should not be equated with the principles of validation associated with empirical research, they provide a framework which enables the biographer to preserve the credibility of his/her artistic endeavour without constraining the fertile imagination from discovering its limits (Eisner, 1981). Ultimately, "validity in the arts is the product of the persuasiveness of the personal vision; its utility is determined by the extent to which it informs" (ibid.)

Biography: a kaleidoscope of impulses, instincts, memories and dreams

The power of narratives in human lives, in educational practice, and in research has increasingly become the focus of attention of several writers. Carol Witherall and Nel Noddings (1991), who advocate the use of life histories as a pedagogic tool, suggest:

... telling our stories can be cathartic and liberating. But it is more than that. Stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning and researching to improve the human condition. (p. 280)

An enduring critique of life history research is the relativism of truth associated with the construction and analysis of biography. Narrative research challenges the notion of there being no “truth”, but only a series of subjective views. Particular kinds of truth are lodged in people’s narratives. Although this truth can be quite different from “historical truth which employs its own mechanisms of validation and verification,” it nevertheless impacts significantly on the individual’s life (Measor & Sikes, 1992, pp. 224–225). Fish (1980, in Witherall & Noddings, 1991, p. 199) asserts that interpreting a text is never a case of being faithful to the facts. Interpretation, he says, is an activity in which we specify what it means to be faithful to the facts.

We agree on the parameters of the narrative codes in which we should be operating. What exonerates us from the charge of relativism is the fact that narrative codes are public. There is no such thing as private language. All we know of the world emerges through our speaking it and all language is public. (Pagano, 1991 in Witherall & Noddings, 1991, p. 200)

Hence, narration is a displacement of an inner reality to an outer reality (Witherall & Noddings, 1991). Given the isolated character of the environment in which most educators work, it is not surprising that we do not know much about what educators know or how they come to learn what they do know. Yet what educators know is crucial to understanding and changing the educational process (Cortazzi, 1993).

Klienmann (1983 in Cortazzi, 1993, p. 242), suggests that in moving beyond reductionist explanations to contextual ones we begin not only to derive more adequate explanations of phenomena but also to achieve insights more useful to practitioners. Teacher education can benefit intensely by embracing such theories, practitioners’ knowledge, and meaning systems as part of the explanatory process. This is powerfully done by crafting stories of teaching and learning in which teachers add richness and validity to accounts of their work by uncovering and sharing their own implicit theories about teaching and learning. Bringing teachers’ stories into the canon of educational literature may confer special status on both the writers and their stories since they defy the commonplace accepted dichotomies drawn between theory and practice.

Your own experience is a valid part of your own knowledge

There is a growing body of literature in psychology, philosophy, and the natural sciences that has acknowledged the value of narratives. The Personal Narratives group, for example, has engaged in a collective endeavour to explore women’s personal narratives in the creation of a feminist theory. It emerges from and reflects the intellectual histories of the members of an editorial group of publishers in feminist research. The Personal Narratives group in the USA (1989) asserts:

... your own experience is a valid part of your own knowledge, as long as it is subject to public critical appraisal. And any way, it is your OWN understanding and practices you are trying to improve. (p. 14)

Another perceived limitation of narrative research in education is that it is confined to small samples of educators. The educational life history methodology necessitates small samples or individual subjects because the approach involves protracted observation or extensive interviewing. The emergent narrative therefore achieves a richness of depth which empirical research involving larger samples is unlikely to yield.

Life histories as a counterculture

“In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical that we know about the person the teacher is” (Goodson, 1992, pp. 10, 234). When we begin by examining the educator’s work in the context of his/her life, we find that the educator is not simply a practitioner but a striving useful person with a unique history, which impacts on his/her work. It would be reasonable therefore, to consider the social dynamics, which have shaped the life. Thus, the act of constructing narratives forces the author to move from discrete experience to an account of why and how the life took the shape it did (Personal Narrative Group, 1989). Educators are often perceived as a monolithic entity, objects which can be manipulated for particular ends (Goodson, 1992). Studying educators’ lives represents a counterculture which encourages teachers to emerge from the shadows, (Personal Narratives Group, 1989), a counterculture that “works against the grain of power/knowledge as held and produced by politicians and administrators” (Goodson, 1992, p. 11). Traditionally, research has tended to present an archetypal image of teachers, by using positivistic approaches aimed at quantifying teaching performance. These positivistic approaches strip research of the rich tapestry of human experience and emotion. They attempt to make sense of pieces of teachers’ lives without understanding the narrative wholes in which the pieces are embedded.

I began this paper pledging my intention not to become overly defensive about narrative research. It appears as though I have not succeeded in maintaining this pledge. Perhaps I do not need to be apologetic for my defensive tone since scepticism and suspicion of narrative research often result in its rejection. There appears to be a growing discontent with traditional conceptions of knowledge and how to access this knowledge, particularly amongst younger scholars. We do need to “open up new ways of seeing and saying” (Eisner, 1996, p. 4). Narrative research as an alternate form of data representation “resides on the cutting edge of enquiry into research methodology” (ibid., p. 4). However, it would be naive not to acknowledge that narrative research is extremely contentious and there remain several unresolved contradictions and tensions in this craft. One of these tensions is the distinction between biographer/researcher and journalist.

Biographer, journalist or burglar?

Voices of caution: From cautious critics of narrative research:

Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world. The biographer at

work, indeed, is like a professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through a certain drawer that he has good reason to think contains the jewellery and the money, and triumphantly bearing this away. (Kaplan, 1994, in Manke, 1996, p. 6)

Is there any discernible difference between the journalist and the biographer, or do they both appropriate another individual's life for their own purposes, "triumphantly bearing away the jewels?" (Manke, 1996, p. 8). One of the hazards of "wandering into the darkness of the forest called biography is finding that there are monsters hiding among what seemed to be well known trees and bushes" (ibid., p. 5). These monsters often appear in the apparently innocuous shape of ownership, ethics, legality, and integrity of the data. Many an enthusiastic biographer has been disillusioned in discovering that his/her analytical interests had to be sacrificed because of unanticipated resistance from his/her subject. Others have found that the notion of shared ownership and control (highlighted by the Personal Narrative Group, 1989), is illusory when there is an irreconcilable dissonance between the needs and agendas of the biographer and those of the writer.

Equally contentious is the issue of relationships between researcher and subject. Manke (1996, p. 2) argues that the first point of contention is the idea of doing a life history because someone is important. She argues further that the issue gets further complicated by the writer's "veneration and awe (of his/her subject) so that the writer is susceptible to the loss of self-importance" (ibid., 1992, p. 10). Such a situation is potentially dysfunctional, particularly when the researcher's voice is consciously muted to maintain geniality in the relationship. Conversely, if critical research challenges the oppressive conditions that silence individuals, the critical question is: how can we (the researchers) be outside that oppressive framework? While the assumption is that those who speak tell their stories with their own voices, the telling occurs through the mediation of a researcher who has a vested interest in the story.

While there can be no definitive answers or solutions to the tensions and contradictions raised here, there is indeed a fine line that separates the art of biography from the craft of journalism. Subjects of biographies *can* protect themselves from unscrupulous biographers by extracting promises that they (subjects) will have total control over what will be seen publicly. Undoubtedly this would diminish the number of life histories published. However, even with this kind of unconditional promise, subjects must risk the pain of "reading interpretations of their lives that do not *fit* the categories of understanding they themselves have developed, and authors must anticipate the resistance of their subjects" (Manke, 1996, p. 13). At best, biographers need to be sensitive to these tensions to prevent the fine craft from lapsing into something akin to journalism. Smith (1994) articulates this tension:

Virginia Woolf was half-right: Writing lives is the devil. But a strand of intellectual excitement, approaching ecstasy, also exists. If one is fortunate to find a heroine or hero from another time, place, and culture, the biographical activity takes on a strong cast of ethnography. (1994, p. 292)

Studying teachers' lives: a story of action, within the theory of context

The critical focus for Life History work is to locate the teacher's own life history alongside a broader contextual analysis. In the words of Stenhouse in Goodson (1992,

p. 6), “a story of action, within the theory of context.” One of the most significant features of work on teachers’ lives is that it provides insights into teaching as a “gendered profession” (Goodson, 1992, p. 14) as well as the production of a feminist teachers’ pedagogy within a particular sociopolitical context. Studying teachers’ lives might provide new insights into how teachers might approach reform and change to cope with the challenges of the postmodern world since, ultimately, knowledge can only be produced through an intimate interrogation of individual experience (Griffiths, 1995). To date much of the educational research employed in teacher education has been developed from a foundational disciplinary discourse with its philosophical, psychological, historical, sociological components – far removed from teachers’ personal knowledge and experiences. It has been produced by “scholars writing within their own contexts and resonates with their own career concerns in a publish or perish environment” (Goodson, 1994, p. 15).

If teachers’ voices in general have been absent from educational research, it is particularly true for African women whose voices have often been deliberately excluded (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993; Weiner, 1993; Yates, 1993). Casey (1995) suggests that women teachers’ own understanding and interpretation of their experiences have been until very recently not only unrecorded, but also silenced. This contributed to the common stereotype that women teachers are one-dimensional and uniformly apolitical creatures caricatured mainly by men who have studied their lives (Casey, 1995). In Casey’s collection of biographies entitled *I answer with my life*, we are given a fuller picture of their often “unbelievable working conditions, their own sacrifices and struggles in the face of conditions that seemed to be organised to prevent their success” (Perkins, 1989 in Casey, 1995, p. xiv).

Through her collection of biographies of women teachers we are able to see them as “authors of their own lives and just as importantly, as authors of social change” (ibid., p. 232). “Authored in the obscurity of nameless educational institutions, the life histories of these ... women remind us of the extraordinary theoretical and practical powers of *ordinary* teachers and their students” (ibid., p. xv).

Concluding comments

If we accept that our insight into education is best achieved by trying to understand how life is seen by those living it rather than by accepting uncritically perspectives of those administering the system, we have to begin listening more systematically to teachers, teacher educators and children (Molteno, 1997). We have to change the established canon of research to give audience to marginalized voices. Narrative research is dedicated to celebrating the voices of the silenced. But more than that, it celebrates biography as an authentic reflection of the human spirit, a mirror to reflect *visions of our other selves*.

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