

Researching Lives:

***multi-disciplinary approaches in life history research,
auto/biography and narrative research***

Saturday 10 June 2006, at the University of Sussex in Brighton

BOOKLET OF ABSTRACTS

(updated 22 May 2006)

Mark Bhatti

Jayne Raisborough

Just Pottering about? gardening as empowerment and resistance

This paper examines the significance of leisure in the home in the context of the use and meanings of the domestic garden. We argue that the garden is continually being (re) negotiated, and can act as a place for empowerment, especially for women. Gardening promises some space for freedom and it can also be a source of artful creativity, self-expression, and resistance to dominating ideologies. Primary research in the form auto/biography is used in this paper to examine the ways in which the garden represents a powerful theme in gendered home-making, and shows how the garden is 'political'. The life story is drawn from the Mass Observation Archive based at the University of Sussex, UK. One woman's story is told, about her garden, her childhood, and her family.

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Gert Biesta and Michael Tedder

Lifelong Learning and the Ecology of Agency – A lifecourse perspective

"Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course" is a major, large-scale research project which aims to deepen understanding of the meaning and significance of formal and informal learning in the lives of adults, and aims to identify ways in which the learning of adults can be supported and enhanced.

A series of life-history interviews with 120 adults is being conducted over a 30-month period in order to gain a detailed understanding of their learning biographies. Coupled iteratively with the work on individual life histories will be panel data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS).

Gert Biesta and Michael Tedder have as a focus 'learning in the family and the local community.' Currently we are considering ways in which agency and learning can be conceptualised in the project by exploring empirical and theoretical questions about the relationship of learning to the achievement and exercise of agency throughout people's lives.

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Paula Black

Talking to myself? Methodological issues in interviewing academics from working-class backgrounds

This paper arises from a research project looking at the effects of original working-class background on academic staff experiences, and their career trajectories.

I wish to focus on two aspects of these interviews to date:

1. *The methodological implications for interviewing peers*

Some of the participants have stated explicitly that being interviewed is a means of reflecting on their own research practices. Others have used the sessions as a means of coming to terms with difficult work situations. As an academic member of staff, I

Teresa M. Cairns

Past traces, present memories: exploring life history accounts from the Mass-Observation Archive.

My research, which has auto/biographical origins, is concerned with the inter-relationship of class and gender in the education life histories of correspondents to the Mass-Observation Archive held in the University of Sussex Library. My methodological approach is interdisciplinary, but is particularly influenced by anthropology, & involves an interpretive process, exploring the complex interplay between the social & the personal, & the interaction of the past in the present, within correspondents' life narratives. Within the transitional space of the Archive correspondents recount their life stories in fragments, their narratives scattered across Directive replies. In this paper I draw upon the 'quilted narratives' of 2 correspondents resulting from their responses to 3 Mass-Observation Directives – Education, Growing Up & Close Relationships – to demonstrate my working method.

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Terence Chivers

Identifying and stimulating learning through life story writing

My aim is to work with small groups of members of the University of the Third Age, engaged in life story writing, in order to stimulate experiential and reflective learning. Experiential learning reveals thought about experience, while reflective learning involves more systematic thinking “on what we ‘know’ already” (Moon J. (2004): *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning*, London: Routledge, p 130).

Two principal sources of learning have appeared:

1. That relating to the narrative sections which members present at meetings.

Sian Edwards

‘It hurt’: A case study of an ‘insider’ researcher

This paper presents a case study on the emotional issues experienced by Robert, an ‘insider’ researcher involved in The Haemophilia and HIV Life History Project. Robert himself has Haemophilia and HIV.

Four questions will be considered:

- Was the researcher, affected by haemophilia and HIV himself, adequately prepared for this role?
- In what ways was the interview affected by the interpersonal relationship of researcher and interviewee?
- Was the emotion experience by the researcher the result of past memories being triggered by the interview?
- What aspect of the narratives provoked the painful emotions?

A brief exploration will be undertaken of the potential risks for ‘insider’ researchers involved in oral history projects related to sensitive and traumatic subjects. The lessons learnt by the research team will be highlighted with some concrete suggestions for oral history projects which use researchers that are personally involved with the subject matter under enquiry.

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Linda Grace

The Lindfield History Project

The Lindfield History Project group is a local community group, which aims to undertake social history projects in the Parish of Lindfield, and to make the findings

Gerry Holloway and Ned Hoskins

“How was it for you, dear?” An experience of interviewing/being interviewed by a partner.

Interviewing one's partner for a whole life history raises some interesting issues for the life history researcher. Gerry has recently completed a five hour interview with Ned on his life generally and his life as an artist in particular. This was the first time we had formally set out to record his life and we found the process intriguing.

In this session we shall recreate our post interview discussion, raising issues such as insider knowledge, memory and narrative structure.

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Mehri Honarbin-Holliday

What of 'the lives' beyond the thesis?

Bringing critical and reflexive ethnographic observations in the study of art education in the Islamic Republic of Iran together with a range of philosophical contentions, Derrida, Geertz, Lefebvre, and Wright Mills amongst others, I have reconstructed the participants' personal histories spatially in multi-text form. Thus the thesis is an arrangement of 'Texts and Spaces'. This spatial textual arrangement of ontologies and related expressions, common as well as incongruent experiences and artefacts of identities, has made significant even those data conventionally perceived as 'marginal'. No life or personal history given by the participant could be considered small or irrelevant because the weight it gained in the processes of illuminating the bigger picture, or the thesis possessing thick description. Indeed, through projecting and understanding the multi-perspective mininarratives, or personal histories, one could understand the complexity of the shift in ideologies in the recent history of Iran, as well the requirements of the research questions.

Beyond the success of the thesis and its interdisciplinary methodological 'bravery' however, a rich life must be found for at least part of the data once recognized as poignant, meticulously deconstructed, and presented to illuminate the metanarrative of the human condition. How? The polarities in perception between those publishers and journals who see narrative as scholarly, and those who don't is damning to say the least.

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Lioba Howatson-Jones

Suzanne Hyde

In Search of a Learner

I will outline a research project conducted in conjunction with a large UK trade union, where I am attempting to capture the 'voice' (through the collection of student writing and the analysis of in-depth interviews) of learners on courses offered to public sector employees as a result of 'partnerships' brokered between the union, employers and local educational providers. The research journey has highlighted the challenges in conducting a writing project with adult learners 'at a distance' and despite much effort from researchers and partner organisations, has elicited a poor response rate. Issues highlighted include: the context of life history research, perceptions of a life history research project by potential story writers, the need for good practice re: 'inclusivity' issues in project literature and the benefits of promoting the notion of 'writing for history'.

Suzanne Hyde

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Alison James

Art, Life, Meaning: a biographical exploration of the work and times of Dod Procter RA

My talk will draw on two years of Phd research on this Cornish painter, in terms of both the process and results of my investigation. I will reflect on the challenges of reconstructing a person's identity from life data which is incomplete, and of responding to the sensitivities (of family, friends and associates) which may have occasioned information to be suppressed at times. My approach relates biographical theory to published comment, media reviews, and personal papers to consider the multiple interpretations of Dod as an artist and a person which have been generated. Art historians, critics and consumers have long pondered how contextual information can illuminate our understanding of a piece of art, as well as the person who produced it. My findings will be related to examples of her art in order to determine the extent to which an artist can be absent from the work they create.

Alison James

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Margaretta Jolly

What I Never Wanted to Tell You: Therapeutic Letter writing

The fashion for therapeutic letter writing – to everyone from your mother to ‘a good Samaritan who has helped you’ and your pet – represents the culture of self-help in all its self-exploring and self-regarding guises. In my discussion, I want to examine this practice as a particularly contemporary form of life writing, and to ask how we can measure the efficacy of such letter writing in improving relationships, including letters deliberately written not-to-be-sent. I will ask what we can make of the phenomenon more generally from a cultural and literary point of view and whether it can be understood as a metaphorical attempt at mediation beyond the psychological. In doing so, I will also compare it to the professional practice, by some therapists, of corresponding with their clients as part of their treatment.

Margaretta Jolly

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Kip Jones

“The one about Princess Margaret” : An auto-ethnographic/auto-biographic performance piece

The presentation self-questions its author as a member of a culture at a specific time and place: being queer in 1965 on a night in New York City at a famous (straight) mod nightclub, ‘Arthur’. Themes include being different as cutting edge, the celebration of being an outsider, seeing oneself from outside of the ‘norm’, and the interior conflicts and processes involved in “coming out” as a gay male in a straight world.

These observations are set within the flux and social instability of the Sixties—a period of great social change, but also a time which is often viewed in retrospect as consistent and definable. The continuum from “straight” to “gay” is misconstrued in a similar way within the wider heterosexual culture’s need to set up a sexual binary and force sexual “choice” decision-making for the comfort of the majority culture’s maintenance of the status quo.

The production uses tools from the arts as a powerful way for auto-ethnography to recover yet interrogate the meanings of lived experiences.

Dr Kip Jones

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Roger Jones

The experiences of 14 - 19 year old Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender students within the secondary school and sixth form college sectors in Hampshire, England.

This paper will initially outline the social context within which Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth find themselves. In so doing some of the contradictory findings which have become apparent from recent qualitative research are examined. On the one hand, accounts of victimisation, leading to high rates of suicide, self-harm and mental health problems linked to low self-esteem have been revealed by Warwick (2001) and Rivers (2003) while on the other, more affirmative, celebratory accounts that suggest that being young and LGBT no longer poses an identity crisis have been provided by Savin-Williams (2005).

The proposed methodology for my own research will be described, and in particular attention will be directed to the ethical and methodological issues that are emerging. The intention is to interview 16 year old LGBT students about their experiences at school and in further education. In addition senior school/college management and teaching staff will be interviewed concerning curricula issues relating to the teaching of LGBT issues, in the classroom and policies/practices concerning homophobic bullying and harassment.

Roger Jones

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Catherine Lamont-Robinson

Autobiography and Visual Impairment.

Research into visual impairment has led me to explore autobiographical texts which reveal insightful responses to congenital blindness and loss of sight. One such memoir, John Hull's 'Touching the Rock' documents the author's first four years without sight by means of a diary format. The immediacy of the dated entries side-steps the tendency to remodel experience from the perspective of hindsight.

This paper investigates how autobiographical material cross-referenced with neurological, psychological and philosophical frameworks can provide a rich methodological resource.

I believe that the interactive processes intrinsic to art practice supports the development of socio/cultural and emotional factors alongside cognitive development and I shall also present a selection of artwork arising from my current longitudinal case studies of individual children with visual impairment.

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Ray Marshall

In my day: An investigation into the loss of physicality in ageing men and how this may impact on their perceptions of masculinity.

The physical aspects of masculinity have been well documented. Connell (1995) maintains that to be an adult male is to have a physical presence. A study by Klein (1993) of men who constructed imposing physiques to hide the insignificance they really felt.

My research will seek to explore how men, who have been in occupations that have demanded high levels of physicality, and where physical prowess has status, kudos and power, come to terms with their ageing bodies and how this may impact on their perceptions of self in particular their perception of masculinity.

There will be 12 male respondents in the study all between the ages of 40 and 64. The intention is to interview each respondent at least three times.

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Joseph Maslen

The Theatre of the Archive: Performing Life History

This paper adopts a dramatic 'living history' approach: hats, cockney and Scottish accents, and mock tape-recorder interviews, and a letter opened three times with three different narrative effects.

The letter is photocopied from the Labour History Archive. This paper is based on records of old Left-wing campaigners interviewed on their lives of the thirties by a (female) ex-comrade in 1982 and 1983, and correspondence between narrators and interviewer from 1984.

Niamh Moore

**Teleological versus Genealogical Approaches to Narrative:
Accounts of Childhood in the Oral Histories of Ecofeminist Activists**

This paper opens up a discussion about different interpretive strategies, comparing the implications of teleological and genealogical approaches to narrative. I draw on oral history interviews with women environmental activists on the west coast of Canada, to illustrate the implications of different ways of reading activist stories of childhood experiences of self in relation to nature. A teleological approach relies on notions of linear narratives and concepts of progress, producing readings of childhood accounts of nature in activist narratives as origin and resource for the adult activist self. A genealogical reading refuses this notion of a search for origins and instead of reading the child as origin of the adult, understands the subject, child or adult, as ‘the effect of the interweaving of certain historical and cultural practices’ (Tambouku and Ball). Through this comparison of teleological and genealogical readings the paper aims to reveal the different epistemological and political agendas implicit in these approaches.

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Olivia Sagan

Ann V Salvage

Caring Towards Death: Becoming and Being a Palliative Care Nurse

This paper deals with methodological aspects of M Phil/Ph D research being undertaken at Roehampton University. The research aims to illuminate the process by which individuals come to work as and continue to be palliative care nurses in English hospices and will adopt a phenomenological approach alongside personal narrative.

The background to the research will be discussed and details of the research design and methodology explained. The main focus of the paper will be on the selection of

Janine van Someren

Biographical Research: A Rehearsed Story?

Life history interviews have been conducted with four female tennis players who competed at Wimbledon between 1930 and 1974. These interviews have given an insight into their sporting experiences, alongside the historical context of pre and post war Britain and the social context of being a female athlete. Additionally, Wengraf (2001) suggests that in order to improve the understanding of a story it should be compared with other told stories. Findings from the life history interviews will be compared with the biographies of female tennis players who competed within the same cultural and structural conditions. A review of obituaries of female tennis players will also be used as an additional source when specific sporting auto/biographies are not available. This paper draws attention to methodological issues regarding memory and how 'stories' are retold.

Mia Thornton and Julia Winckler

Retracing Heinrich Barth in Niger

This talk will focus on a virtually unknown archive in the town of Agadez, Northern Niger, West Africa. In 1850, the German explorer Heinrich Barth, who had been traveling through North and Central Africa under contract of the British Foreign Office and Her Majesty's spent some time in Agadez. He was the first known

Ivan Vodochodsk

Methodological issues in interviews with men born in 1940s Czechoslovakia

I would like to address methodological issues raised by the research I conduct for my PhD. thesis. Using biographical narrative perspective on interviews with men born in 1940s I try to understand their accounts of experiencing early adulthood and starting family during the period of „real socialism“ in 1970s Czechoslovakia. My aim is to add alternative view of the gendered aspects of “real socialism” by paying attention specifically to men of this cohort who have

Anthea Williams

Can These Bones Live?

Life narratives told in the context of hoping to enter a professional training – for ministry in the Church of England - are being examined in the light of concerns expressed by Michel Foucault in his final lectures at the Collège de France in 1982.

Foucault's increasing preoccupation towards the end of his life with the 'problem' of the relationship of human subjects to truth led him to the idea that a return to the self could result in spiritual transformation. This 'care of the self' goes beyond self-knowledge and self-awareness, and allows the absorption of truth by the subject.

This short talk explores how far a content analysis of ordination candidates' stories supports the idea of a pocket of survival of Foucauldian spirituality, in view of the pressure on these self-identified religious subjects to view the self as an object which must be consciously moulded to fit institutional requirements.

Anthea Williams

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