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# A HISTORY OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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## ABSTRACT

Biographical researchers in the United Kingdom have been influenced by symbolic interactionism, feminism, oral history, critical sociology, psychoanalysis and what we term an auto/biographical imagination. The latter involves reflexively situating the researcher and her influence, via power, unconscious processes and writing, into the text and by acknowledging the co-construction of stories. The focus of much research has been on marginalised peoples, as part of a democratising project to bring more diverse voices and stories into the historical or contemporary social record. It is important to avoid too rigid a distinction between mainland Europe and developments in Britain. Collaboration and dialogue have been extensive, across various research networks, including in the European Society for Research in the Education of Adults (ESREA).

**Keywords:** Auto/biography. Marginality. Psychosocial. Class. Gender and subjectivity.

## RESUMO

### UMA HISTÓRIA DA PESQUISA BIOGRÁFICA NO REINO UNIDO

Pesquisadores biográficos no Reino Unido foram influenciados pelo interacionismo simbólico, feminismo, história oral, sociologia crítica, psicanálise e o que chamamos de imaginação autobiográfica. Esta última envolve situar reflexivamente o pesquisador e sua influência, através do poder, processos inconscientes e escrita, no texto, e reconhecendo a co-construção de histórias. O foco de muitas pesquisas tem sido sobre os povos marginalizados, como parte de um projeto de democratização para trazer mais vozes e histórias diversificadas para o registro social histórico ou contemporâneo. É importante evitar uma distinção demasiado rígida entre a Europa continental e os desenvolvimentos na Grã-Bretanha. A colaboração e o diálogo têm

sido extensos em várias redes de pesquisa, inclusive na Sociedade Europeia de Pesquisa na Educação de Adultos (ESREA).

**Palavras chave:** Auto/biografia. Marginalidade. Psicossocial. Classe. Gênero e subjetividade.

## RESUMEN **UNA HISTORIA DE LA INVESTIGACIÓN BIOGRÁFICA EN EL REINO UNIDO**

Los investigadores biográficos en el Reino Unido han sido influenciados por el interaccionismo simbólico, el feminismo, la historia oral, la sociología crítica, el psicoanálisis y lo que llamamos una imaginación auto/biográfica. Esto último consiste en situar reflexivamente al investigador y su influencia, a través del poder, procesos inconscientes y la escritura, en el texto y reconocer la co-construcción de historias. El foco de gran parte de las investigaciones sobre poblaciones marginadas ha formado parte del proyecto democratizador para traer más voces e historias diversas al registro histórico o social contemporáneo. Es importante evitar la demasiado rígida distinción entre Europa continental y su desarrollo en Gran Bretaña. La colaboración y el diálogo se han extendido a través de diversas redes de investigación, incluyendo a la Sociedad Europea para la Investigación en la Educación de Adultos (ESREA).

**Palabras clave:** Auto/biografía. Marginalidad. Psicossocial. Clase. Género y subjetividad.

### Introduction

The history of biographical research in the United Kingdom (UK) is partly rooted in the oral tradition and its popularity led to the establishment after the Second World War of the Oral History Society. Feminism was subsequently influential alongside a related movement among social scientists to reassert the place of the human subject in social and historical processes. However, it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that biographical methods gained prominence and acceptance, albeit always partial, in UK social science research. This process was associated with the 'turn' to biographical methods (CHAMBERLAYNE et al, 2000) which Prue Chamberlayne and others describe as being a 'subjective or cultural turn

in which personal and social meanings, as bases of social action, gain greater prominence' (2000, p. 1).

The 'turn' marked a dissatisfaction with positivism, its supposed objectivity and the reduction of human experience to numerical formulae and abstraction. In contrast biographical methods brought subjectivity centre stage by foregrounding the meaning which people give to their lives. Thus: 'The 'turn' [...] has been a response to a long-standing omission or marginalization of the human subject in research, under the banner of objectivity and generalizability, modelled on the natural sciences' (MERRILL & WEST, 2009, p. 3). Moreover, as Plummer argues biographical methods

introduced a 'critical humanism' (2001, p. 14) to research, in which space was found to re-assert the struggle for social justice as well as for the importance of narrative and even the spiritual in human life. Importantly much UK biographical research has centred on issues of inequality, social purpose, inclusion and human agency.

In the UK since the 1980s biographical methods have drawn upon specific theoretical perspectives such as symbolic interactionism, feminism, the psychosocial (including psychoanalysis) and, methodologically, the German interpretive tradition as exemplified by the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) (WEST et al, 2007). There is a constant developing and diversification of approaches such that Nurse and O'Neill (2017) assert, 'since the 1990s biographical research in the UK is currently undergoing a variety of changes, which could be described as generational and thematic' (2017, p. 711). These methods are dominant in the disciplines of sociology, critical and narrative psychology, history, education and, in particular, adult education – not only in the UK but in the rest of Europe. A number of university research centres have been established focusing on narrative, biographical and auto/biographical research. These include, for example, the Centre for Narrative and Auto/Biographical Studies (NABS) at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, which was established in 2006. The Centre is interdisciplinary and uses a range of medium such as talk, transcribed texts, photographs and memory. It also acts as the base for the Scottish and Northern Narratives Network. The Director is Liz Stanley – a key UK feminist who developed the research approach of the auto/biographical I (see below). The University of Sussex established in 1999 the Centre for Life History and Writing Research. The Centre includes the Mass Observation Archive which involves a large number of people from across

the UK in autobiographical writing about different aspects of their lives. There is a Centre for Narrative Studies at the University of East London, led among others by Mollie Andrews. She has interrogated the politics of storytelling, and how memories of profound change processes, as in the fall of the Berlin Wall, are affected by the researcher's own subjective, largely unconscious mourning, in her case over the marginalisation of the progressive ideals of socialism in the rise of the neo-liberal era (ANDREWS, 2007). There is an Auto/biographical narrative research group at Canterbury Christ Church University, which has focused, inter alia, on the role of narrative in career counselling and guidance (REID and WEST, 2018).

What is termed the biographical turn was, to repeat, partly a reaction against the absence of any notion of a nuanced human subject in a social science modelled on the natural sciences (PLUMMER, 2001). Social science, including psychology – in the writings of Piaget, for example and especially in neuroscience – has often strived to build a syntax of human behaviour, or a grammar, and a language of probabilities and overarching theoretical explanation of how things work. However, Piaget's grammar of cognitive stages in human development was never fully grounded in the semantics of actual people in specific settings. His stages are abstractions, albeit useful ones. Moreover, the currently dominant discourse of neuroscience tends to obliterate the human subject too: it strives to connect patterns of electrical activity in the brain or the characteristics of particular genes to specific behaviours, but in ways that tend to eliminate human experience, selfhood, choice and agency. The whole people whose actions and emotional experiences trigger the complex firing of neurons and consequent chemical changes in the brain are airbrushed out of the picture (BAINBRIDGE and WEST, 2012). Auto/biograph-

ical narrative research, as we frame it, offers an alternative to this by engaging with people and the semantics of their experience and the meanings they themselves give to events, as well as with the researchers who also lie at the heart of the meaning making.

While biographical methods and qualitative methods more widely in the UK are popular they have not been without their critics. Fieldhouse, a UK historian, for example, sees the method as being too individualistic and concerned only with 'fine, meaningless detail' (1996, p. 119). For him the bigger picture of history and society is lost or forgotten as a result of focusing on a detailed story of an individual life. More recently, there has been a backlash against qualitative methods as a whole by UK research funding bodies and some universities calling for more researchers to engage with quantitative methods alongside a more prominent place for the teaching of quantitative methods. However, the latter, as stated, can dehumanise people, reducing selves and complexity to statistics. In contrast, auto/biographical methods illuminate the meaning, richness and complexity of an individual's life within a historical, social, political as well as a particular context.

## Locating Ourselves in UK Biographical Research

As researchers working in the field of adult education in the UK, we reflect and are shaped by both UK and wider biographical traditions. We have both been stimulated by the ideas of feminist Liz Stanley (1992) and her term auto/biography which refers 'to the inter-relationship between the construction of our own lives through autobiography and the construction of others' lives through biography' (MERRILL & WEST, 2009, p. 8). Stanley (1992) recognised that in writing the stories of others we are also reflecting upon our own histories, social and cul-

tural backgrounds as well as values and subjectivities. For example, the topics that we choose to research are derived from our own personal and professional biographies (MILLER, 2007; WEST, 2016). Like other UK biographical researchers, we argue for bringing the researcher and processes of relationship, power and even the unconscious into the research frame and acknowledge that we cannot divorce our experiences from the understanding of the lives of others. In telling our stories as researchers we are outlining the context and the state of the art of biographical research in the UK and, in particular, in the field of adult education.

## Barbara's Story

Biographical methods have become a popular approach used by adult education researchers in the UK and across Europe in order to gain more in-depth understanding of the learning experiences of adults and what has motivated them (ALHEIT et al, 1995; WEST, 1996; WEST, et al, 2007; FORMENTI and WEST, 2018; FINNEGAN, MERRILL and THUNBORG, 2014). I, Barbara, am a sociologist working in the field of adult education and my interest in using biographical methods is rooted in my own life history. A prime focus has been on gathering stories of adults who decide to return to learn later in life and particularly those who enter higher education from non-traditional backgrounds and whose life histories have been shaped by inequalities such as class, gender and race (MERRILL, 1999). These issues have been part of my own life too in varying ways. Being female and working class I became aware from my experiences of class and gender discrimination and inequalities in UK society. I was one of the ten per cent from a working-class background to make it to university in the early 1970s. Although I was politically aware as a Marxist and a feminist, I was overwhelmed as

an undergraduate student by the middle class background and privileged lives of the majority of students. I was an outsider. As a university researcher working in an elite institution I wanted to find out how our working class adult students coped in such an environment. I also had spent several years as a teacher in a multi-cultural secondary school, which made me aware of the extensiveness of racism through the stories of my black pupils. My approaches to biographical research, in this context, are influenced by two main perspectives: symbolic interactionism and feminism.

## Symbolic Interactionism and the Chicago School

The work of the symbolic interactionists at the American Chicago School of Sociology has had a significant influence on UK biographical research. Researchers looked back to the classic study by Thomas and Znaniecki on *The Polish Peasant* (1918-1921, p. 1958 edition) and their stories of being an immigrant in a new culture and society, to Clifford R. Shaw's *Jack the Roller* (1966), a study on delinquency, and to the work of Goffman, (1959, 1961), Becker, (1967, 1970) and others. The micro sociology of symbolic interactionists appealed to UK biographical researchers as its humanistic approach places the social actor and the meaning and interpretation they give to their lives and social situation as central to the research process. Social interaction with others is key to the formation of the self, biography and the social world but this process is always located within an historical and cultural context. As Meltzer et al stress interaction is seen as 'a crucial link between the individual and the social group' (1975, p. 50). Symbolic interactionists recognise the complexities of daily life through their methodological approach focusing on the need 'to tell it like it is'.

In the UK, much biographical research focuses on marginalised groups and inequalities in society, something inherited from symbolic interactionists and feminists. As Becker (1967) asserts research is about 'sticking up for the underdog' so that researchers should always ask themselves 'Whose side are we on?' (BECKER, 1967) and seek to illuminate individual resistance to the power of institutions (GOFFMAN, 1959). Importantly symbolic interactionists link agency, structure, the micro, meso, and the macro as they locate power in the processes of everyday interaction (MUSOLF, 1992). As Plummer, a key figure in UK biographical research, stresses: 'It is a fully dialectical theory where subject and object, creativity and restraint, pattern and chaos, structure and meaning, knowledge and action are ceaselessly emergently intertwined' (1991, p. XV).

## Moving on to Feminism

Feminist biographical methods emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s and were influenced by symbolic interactionism (and the work of C. MILLS, 1957) but moved beyond symbolic interactionism to take a more critical and political stance. In the 1970s second wave feminism stimulated the development of feminist theory and methodology in UK academia and the critique of traditional 'malestream' sociology. Women like Liz Stanley, Ann Oakley, Sue Wise, Janet Finch and many others were influential in developing feminist biographical research methods. The focus was on the everyday lives of ordinary women bringing them out of obscurity, letting their voices be heard and highlighting that 'the personal is political' so that individual experiences are also collective ones. Feminists have shaped the way biographical research is undertaken, particularly in relation to participants. In contrast to 'traditional' research feminists'

work with women and not on women (OAKLEY, 1981). Feminist research emphasises ‘the perspectives of those whose lives are shaped and constrained (or marginalised) by the dominant social order’ (LAWTHOM in GOODLEY et al, 2004, p. 102).

A central contribution is the insistence on a subjective (and intersubjective) engagement between the researcher and the researched with the aim of establishing a democratic relationship that breaks down hierarchical approaches to interviewing. Oakley (1981) takes this a step further by promoting the interview as a conversation. There is the need to build secure, collaborative relationships to work respectfully with participants (STANLEY & WISE, 1995). It often entails viewing the interview as a dialogical process involving, for example, sending a copy of the transcript to the participant to enable them to say whether or not they feel it is an accurate representation of their story. Others provide participants with feedback of the findings to participants (WEST, 2007). Rebecca Lawthom (2004) takes collaboration and ownership a step further in her approach to feminist emancipatory interviewing. For her: ‘The emancipatory framework... allows the interviewee – or co-researcher – to shape the story, have full editorial control and present a first-person narrative’ (2004, p. 60). Challenging inequalities and oppression is a cornerstone of feminist biographical research and gives it a profound social purpose. As Jane Thompson, a feminist adult education researcher, reminds us: ‘But it is what becomes of the stories that matters. And what uses can be made of them in the search for political knowledge and theoretical understanding’ (2000, p. 7).

### Linden’s story

Linden has revisited the roots of his interest in auto/biographical narrative research work-

ing with Barbara (MERRILL and WEST, 2009) as well as Laura Formenti, in a new dialogic book on the meanings and problematic of transformative processes in learning (FORMENTI and WEST, 2018). The metaphor of ‘fragments’ haunts and energises his work. Linden works too as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and feelings of internal fragmentation, sometimes strong, other times less so, and between past and present, appearance and feeling, who we are and want to be, the feminine and masculine as well as false and truer selves, has been a preoccupation in his own life and in his work with others (WEST, 1996; 2001; 2016). Fragments dominate the academy, too, between different disciplines, and in the separation of mind, body and emotion. The academic world can embody binary, either/or dynamics. Academic tribal affiliations tend to stifle the desire for multi-disciplinarity and dialogue; the sociological and psychological have especially suffered from this, among other disciplines.

### Academic dynamics

Fractures partly emanate from differences in how we perceive the world or generate knowledge of it, as well as what counts as significant ways of seeing in a given community. We may view the world and ourselves as objective phenomena and consider ‘subjectivity’ to be a problem, outside the remit of science. Nowadays many of us search for meaningful connections across difference. Psychosocial studies and auto/biographical research, broadly defined, are prime examples of this (MERRILL and WEST, 2009; HOLLWAY and JEFFERSON, 2000; WEST, 2016). When Linden writes of auto/biographical research, he has in mind the effort to understand the life of another, to imagine what it is like to see the world through their eyes, or experience life in their shoes. But we must acknowledge how we may shape – via power

and unconscious processes – the stories people tell. Our own lives, experience and preoccupations shape the way we bring meaning to others' stories, for better as well as, occasionally, for worse.

For these reasons, auto/biographical narrative enquiry is an effort to interrogate, reflexively, the interplay of two lives, or more, in both past and present, and to regard this as an important element in sense making. If research in essence is about truth seeking – informed by a poststructuralist, postmodern critique of the one truth – the ethic of truth seeking remains important, which includes how we as researchers shape the generation of stories. This is not to do with a solipsistic narcissism, but rather a determination to make better sense of the whole research experience, beyond naïve objectivism (WEST, 2016).

Linden joined a newly formed research community, ESREA (the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) and the Life History and Biography Network in 1994. He has jointly convened the Network in recent years, working with Laura Formenti and Alan Bainbridge. The Network's conferences illuminate a tension in European biographical research, with different influences at work in comparison with the UK. For example, Peter Alheit is from Northern Europe and sociology. He emphasises how lives are structured, and yet potential sites for what he terms 'biographical learning' or 'biographicity', i.e. the subject's capacity to become a 'social actor' through recognizing the actions of given frameworks and prescriptive knowledge in his/her life. The subject can learn to experience life contexts as more malleable and designable, at least to an extent (ALHEIT, 1995; ALHEIT and DAUSIEN, 2000, 2007).

Pierre Dominicé represents someone closer to the Latin, Mediterranean world, where research in education is strongly connected to

practice; he used the methodology of learning biographies to cultivate reflexivity and critical knowledge among professionals (DOMINICÉ, 1990, 2000, 2007). Alheit's methodological rigour and the need to legitimise biographical and narrative methods in a somewhat sceptical German scientific community, contrasted with Dominicé's practical, political and ethical focus, and the creation of space where biographies could be talked about, shared, considered more deeply and re-edited. Both Pierre and Peter have influenced our work in thinking about biographical research as participatory, with collaborative critical interrogation, and learning from each other. Many scholars, mostly women (see FORMENTI and WEST, 2018) have been active in the Network – including Barbara – bringing their commitment, critical attitude, feminism and relational sensibilities, to create an impressively articulated map of diverse foci and methodological subtlety. The Network was no two-man business, nevertheless there was a gendered imbalance in power and visibility. When we talk of biographical research in the UK, it is deeply influenced by wider European traditions, including methodological design and analysis (FORMENTI and WEST, 2018; CHAMBERLAYNE et al, 2000).

## Psychosocial perspectives

Straddling conventional disciplinary divides has, as noted, been an important imperative in Linden's work. As it has in work we have done together, on the complex circumstances and motivations of particular non-traditional learners in universities, across Europe, and how they, or at least some, come to prosper and imagine new possibilities (FINNEGAN, MERRILL and THUNBORG, 2014). Drawing on critical theory, psychoanalysis and Bourdieu, it was possible to build more of an interdisciplinary, psychosocial understanding of change process-



es, based on the concept of recognition and the work of the critical theorist Axel Honneth (2007; 2009). Honneth was engaged in what he termed a normative search for the emotional, intersubjective, symbolic and material prerequisites for human flourishing, as well as with questioning how the present neo-liberal order, or dystopia, as he perceived it, came to be regarded as natural.

Honneth developed the idea that experiences of self-recognition were central in human flourishing by which people find the means, collectively and individually, to question and challenge the taken for granted – including in the intense auto/biographical work we label psychoanalysis – and remain open to learning from others and otherness. Drawing, in part, on psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, Honneth (2009) distinguished three levels of recognition, which were basic to self-formation and flourishing. Love, he insisted, was fundamental to basic selfhood; the feeling of being accepted, cared for, recognised and encouraged to experiment. He also referenced what he called Freud's great anthropological insight that humans separate from the prime care giver earlier than other mammals, and thus depend absolutely on a supportive environment to flourish. Honneth has a second level of recognition where he refers to the formation of self-respect, in groups, bringing rights as well as responsibilities. When we feel accepted and legitimate in a group we wished to belong to, we can then take more risks in self-expression and agency. A third level of recognition surrounds what is called self-esteem, where we come to play an important role in a group, or wider organisation, and are considered important to its development. We can think of a university seminar, for a non-traditional student, as a location in which some of these dynamics are played out, as in an auto/biographical study of an Asylum Seeker,

who found recognition in important relational encounters with two teachers in an Access to Higher Education programme and in advocacy work in a multi-cultural university (WEST, 2014). Crucially, so to speak, for Honneth (2007; 2009) it is from such intersubjective experiences of self-other recognition that we are better able to recognise the other, from which networks of social solidarity and cooperation across difference might grow (WEST, 2016).

Honneth also explored what he termed the dynamics of disrespect, an idea which Linden has made use of in his work on racism and fundamentalism in marginalised communities (see below, WEST, 2016). This is no abstract philosophical positioning by social actors but is rooted in everyday experience of disrespect, where intuitive notions of justice are violated. Being told, as an Asian taxi driver, in Linden's study, to 'fuck off home', perpetually, or that you and yours are scroungers and undeserving provide some of the fuel for mental suffering as well as various social pathologies. It is possible to illuminate auto/biographically, culturally and psychologically, how racism and xenophobia find purchase in individual lives and across whole communities by chronicling people's stories.

## Oral History: a common influence

We are both influenced, as stated, by oral history. Paul Thompson (2000) was a key advocate of oral history research in the UK. He founded the journal *Oral History* and established, at the British Museum, the National Life Study Collection. For Thompson oral history is about focusing on ordinary people enabling them to tell their stories and tell others what life is like for them:

Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the

defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implications for the social message of history as a whole (THOMPSON, 2000, p. 142).

The work of Alistair Thomson (1994) is also influential around the theme of memory and the play of past and present, self and other in storytelling. A present context and affiliations will shape the stories told, and, drawing on psychoanalysis, what may be included and what excluded. Memory, and the stories told about lives, are both deeply illuminating but also problematic in such terms. Oral history has also been a history from below as illustrated by some of the key areas of research: women's history, labour history, black history and social history. In Scotland and Wales oral history has been used as a means to record the changes to traditional rural life through the voices of minority groups such as Gaelic speakers. This method has generated key debates around voice, memory and the nature of the interview (Perke & Thomson, 2006). For oral historians narratives offer a representation of life as told compared to written narratives, which are more subject to constant re-interpretation (THOMPSON, 2000).

### Exemplary study: distress in the city

Michael Tedder (2017), in a new Sage survey of methodologies and methods in educational research (Arthur et al, 2017), has described Linden's work on racism, fundamentalism and 'a democratic education' as an 'exemplary study' in the biographical tradition (p. 289). He describes how Linden, working with various colleagues, has used auto/biographical and narrative methods with adults in higher education (WEST, 1996), with young families and professionals in a Sure Start project (WEST,

2007; 2009), and with family doctors working in inner-city communities. 'West's approach to interviewing explores the emotional dimensions of his participants' lives and his analysis of data is framed by a psychoanalytic understanding' (p. 289). There is a consciousness in this work of the way that responses are shaped auto/biographically, of how unconscious, intersubjective and power dynamics work. We are storied as well as being story tellers.

Linden was troubled by the rise of racism and fundamentalism in as well as the neglect of the city where he was born, and he sought to explore the psychosocial, cultural and political dynamics underlying what he framed its 'distress'. The study was infused by the imaginative spirit of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1957), in which it was deemed essential to connect larger historical or macro forces with the meso or intermediate levels of human experience (in families and diverse cultural groups and local communities) and the intimacies of human life. What, for instance, was the link between growing inequality and well-being? Between what could seem to be the pervasive individualistic neo-liberal mantra of how working class people should learn to cope on their own, with what was happening on the ground? He wanted to illuminate how and why xenophobia flourished and to think seriously about antidotes.

People, Linden insisted, are not simply aggregates of sociological or epidemiological variables. They are living beings with stories to tell: of what it feels like to exist in particular conditions or of the impact of constant disrespect. Their aspirations and narratives have validity in their own terms, however difficult and distasteful some of these might be (as in the stories told by racists or Islamic fundamentalists). Understanding lives from the inside requires time and a psychosocial, historical and educational imagination to interpret

what people say. Such an imagination reminds us, potentially, that people are social agents rather than marionettes on a predetermined sociological stage. People make, as well as are made by, history.

There is an analogy between auto/biographical narrative enquiry and the work of the medical doctor. They, too, seek to do their best by the people entering the clinic. They must know the broad statistical picture of the effects of particular drugs or therapies, from randomized control trials and cohort studies, yet require a subtle, nuanced understanding of the particular individual, and what it is like to live in a specific family, in a given community with distinct problems. In the words of one medical researcher, herself a doctor, individuals are in such terms 'irremediably contextual and (seemingly) idiosyncratic' (GREENHALGH, 1998, p. 251). They live in families, in a street and a community. They have lives shaped but not determined by class, race, gender as well as the subtleties of the intimate relationships in which they are embedded. A statistical sample is always an abstraction, from which contextual detail is erased. The idiosyncrasies of a particular person's narrative and their experience of disease are essential for good diagnostics (GREENHALGH, 1998) as well as in research.

Linden worked auto/biographically with over 50 people for five years, in Stoke-on-Trent, the city where he was born. The study sheds light on the seductions and insecurities fuelling racism and fundamentalism, and how and why space once existed, and can be created again, for democratic community education, across difference (WEST, 2017). But misrecognition happens in intimate and public space in schools, community groups, the workplace, college and university, or the Job Centre or encounters with the police or a taxi driver's abusive clients. The 50 or so participants were in the main 'ordinary' people from various ethnic groups.

Some people – eight to be exact – were interviewed up to three times. Others were interviewed once, alone or in small group, such as Asian taxi drivers playing cricket in a Healthy Living class, under the auspices of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). The study represents a journey into the border country between research and therapy, reality and fiction, self and other, between illuminating, however partially, the distinctiveness of individual lives whilst recognizing the patterns that create categories of people. Auto/biographical methods can celebrate idiosyncrasy and atypicality in life in reaction to a highly reductive, generalized sociology (PLUMMER, 2001). Yet there are patterns among people: each of us at times is vulnerable and dependent and we all suffer loss and frustration in our lives. Most of us know to varying extents love, recognition, hate and disrespect, and we become ill and eventually die.

Linden chronicled certain problems in fine-grained detail, including the radicalization of young Muslims reacting to Islamophobia, feelings of hopelessness, mental distress and every day disrespect. There is the story of 'Raafe' (a pseudonym, meaning companion in Arabic), who had a disturbed background but found recognition in Islamist radical groups in prison, and purpose in radicalising others. There is a story of 'Carol', who lived on a run-down predominantly white working-class estate, who suffered clinical depression and felt abandoned by conventional politics and haunted by gangs peddling drugs, as well as by inter-racial violence on the estate. She found the fascist British National Party (BNP) supportive as they sorted out the 'druggies' and made sure that problems with her house were dealt with by their three newly elected councillors. She eventually found better health and wider recognition in adult education classes, and in listening to children read-

ing in local primary schools; and came to be a community learner, better able to recognise diverse others.

Linden also illuminated resources of hope in the city's history. In university/WEA tutorial classes that did so much to help build the Welfare State in the first decades of the last century, or in the Lidice shall live campaign, in which the Stoke miners sought to rebuild the Czech mining town after its obliteration by the Nazis in the Second World War. The prime conclusions of Linden's study were two-fold: first, that the potent mix of neo-liberal ideology, including the stigmatization of specific communities and the hollowing out of representative democracy, and a loss of historical memory, affects sociocultural, psychological and political health at one and the same time. Second, that human flourishing requires sufficient experiences of recognition: of love and experiences of self-affirmation in intimate and social relationships. We need to feel loved but also – which brings the socio-political into the equation – recognized in groups and wider societies. When we feel sufficiently recognized, we better recognize others, from which stronger social solidarities can flow.

### Non-traditional learners at university, an exemplary 'trans-European' study

As stated above adult education research is now a key area of study for undertaking biographical research in the UK and in Europe as a whole. Much adult education research, like Barbara's, has focused on non-traditional students in higher education (FINNEGAN et al, 2014, MERRILL, 2014, FINNEGAN & MERRILL, 2017; REAY 2003; TETT, 2000) and how they cope, or not, in middle class institutions as well as how their past and present lives led them back into education. In the UK access and widening

participation policies have enabled working class adults to enter universities but once in the system it is deemed to be a level playing field which results in such students experiencing educational inequalities (FLEMING et al, 2017). The choice of which institution to go to and which discipline to study is also highly classed and gendered (REAY et al, 2005).

Social class is a dominant and deeply rooted aspect of UK society and is a part of everyday lived experience. And the education system, including higher education, is one area of society where class is reproduced. As Skeggs asserts: 'Class is alive and well...In fact class is so ubiquitous...Class struggle... is also about the positioning, judgements and relations that are entered into on a daily and personal basis. Living class... is very much part of how class is made' (2004, p. 173). Class analysis and gender analysis are sometimes discussed separately but the stories told by the women Barbara has interviewed reveal that class and gender inequalities cannot be divorced - they are inextricably linked. The women always described themselves as 'working class'. Thus:

Class and gender are also embodied, and affective; it affects our unconscious and conscious sense of self, our ways of being and patterns of meaning making and because of this class and gender are political issues but are not necessarily experienced in that way' (O'NEILL et al, forthcoming).

In examining social class Barbara's research is largely concerned, if not exclusively, with working class women and the intersections between class and gender. This is also a focus for other feminist adult education researchers in the UK (such as SKEGGS, 1997, REAY, 2003, TETT, 2000). Barbara worked on two European research projects: one which focused on the access and retention of non-traditional students in higher education (RANLHE project) and more recently, a study of non-traditional

students and issues of employability and inequality both within universities and beyond, into the labour market (EMPLOY). Biographical interviewing was undertaken using a feminist approach in a way which encouraged a more conversational and democratic relationship (OAKLEY, 1981).

The adult students chose to study for a degree at an elite university because they believed that this would enhance their chances in the labour market enabling them to escape from dead-end jobs. Theoretically, in relation to class, we drew on Bourdieu's (1986a & 1986b) work on capital, field and habitus as a framework for illuminating class inequalities in higher education. In both research projects Barbara was interested in understanding what 'kept them going on' with their studies and how they coped in an environment which was culturally different to their working class communities. In Bourdieu's (1986a & 1986b) terms their cultural, social and economic capitals are different to those of the middle class students and the ethos of the institution. In comparing themselves to the middle class students, social class was perceived by working class students in terms of language, dialect, material possessions, geographical location, culture and dress.

Sharon, a working class single parent studying for a Law degree, realised the importance of having social networks and social capital for obtaining internships while studying and later a position in the Law profession. She witnessed many of her fellow younger middle class students walking into jobs because their parents were partners in a solicitors' firm. She also realised that having had a private education and money helped: obtaining the qualification to get to the bar was beyond her financial means. Despite the structural constraints, Sharon used her agency to attend a university Law Society dinner for students and solicitors in an attempt to build and develop her social

capital. Sharon's story revealed why she chose to study Law. At the age of twelve, her father murdered her mother and she ended up in a foster home as her father was in prison. This traumatic event and later getting divorced made her want to work in the legal business, so that her present life was a deep and complex response to her past one.

Bourdieu's work on class, and capitals, in particular, has been extended and developed by feminist writers such as Adkins and Skeggs (2006) and applied, intersectionally to gender. Class and gender inequalities meant that the working class students were living in two different worlds. For the women in particular university potentially offered a space where they could 'be themselves' until returning home and back to traditional gender roles of housewife and carer. For feminists, extending on Bourdieu's work, this is viewed as emotional capital and they argue this to be a distinctive aspect of gender (NOWOTNY, 1981, REAY, 2006). Julie, like many other single parent students, engaged in emotional capital in relation to her son who experienced both difficulties at school and racism in their community as his father is black and Julie white. For Julie this was a key reason for studying 'to make things different for myself and my son'.

Despite the struggles working class adult students encountered in an elite university, they enjoyed the learning but studying at university came at a price in relation to family and friends. While throughout and at the end of their studies they continued to describe themselves as being working class they were aware that they had distanced themselves from family and friends. In Richard Hoggart's (1957) terms, they were being disloyal to their class. Julie, for example, explained:

I couldn't talk about university to any other mums as I walked to school because I felt they had snubbed me – 'Look at you with your big

briefcase'. It was really tricky to explain to people why I wanted to progress myself. I withdrew from my friends on the estate a little because I found it hard to explain to them why I wanted something different.

Paul reflected on how completing a politics degree changed his outlook on life by politicising him towards Marxism. After finishing his degree, he had to return to his precarious job in the roofing business but found it difficult to talk to his workmates and felt himself to be in a Jekyll and Hyde situation. He felt that his degree was 'a dirty little secret' and that some workmates commented 'you've done a degree but you're still building. What was the point of that? And I'm just sick of like explaining myself so I just avoid it'. Paul, however, did go back to do a Masters' degree part-time while continuing to work as a roofer. Working class adult students like Julie and Paul recognised that they had changed and that they viewed the world in a more critical way. While they did want 'better jobs' and some social mobility they did not want to join the middle class world even if they saw themselves to be different from their working class family and friends. Biographical research on adult students in higher education has contributed to illuminating the significance, persistence and power of social class in UK society, despite how postmodern sociologists in the 1980s and 1990s tended to argue otherwise; while Pahl (1989) insisted that it was an outdated category.

## Conclusion

If our work has been different, there are similarities between us, shaped as we and other UK researchers have been by symbolic interactionism, feminism, oral history, critical sociology, psychoanalysis and the auto/biographical imagination. However, it would be mistaken to make too rigid a distinction between mainland Europe and developments in Britain. Col-

laboration and dialogue have been extensive, across various networks, especially ESREA.

We have also experimented in our writing together in bringing ourselves and stories into the texts: locating our own interest in auto/biography in family history, and, at times, painful lived experiences of gendered and classed exclusions, and psychological suffering. This reflects a wider tendency among other, mainly female biographers, auto/biographers and autoethnographers (the names may be different but they share much in common) to locate their work in their own as well as others' experience. Writing itself has also become a place for experiment and even subversion, by rejecting the sometimes rigid, overly scientific, supposedly objective writing of some, in favour of a visceral enunciation of personal as well as collective experience. This is a deliberate challenge to a masculinist social science (see for instance, FRASER, 2017; or CHAPMAN HOULT, 2014). Writing re-presents lives and stories as relationships, including between the researcher and the objects of her enquiry. It can reconnect research with illuminating the vibrancy of lives, via a poetic, imaginal, even spiritual as well intellectual imagination. Auto/biographical narrative writing in such terms continues the transgressive purpose of that earlier biographical turn.

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