Chapter 1

Introduction

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What stories can we tell of ourselves and others at the beginning of the twenty first century and why should they be of interest to others? This collection of narrative and life history research responds to these questions by offering a range of examples from diverse educational and social contexts. What we offer here are narratives, which illuminate what 'troubles' us. Writing these narratives has enabled us, as educators and researchers who are concerned with learning, and with what it means to have opportunities to engage in learning, to explore how that is bound up with identity and power, and with the relation between individual agency and social structure. Narratives have helped us to do what C. Wright Mills (1970: 248) would refer to as linking 'personal troubles' to 'public issues'.

How the connections between personal and public concerns may be understood and interpreted are important questions for narrative and life history research. This is particularly so at a time when such research is

shaped by 'the ubiquity of personal narratives in contemporary Western culture and politics' (Chase 2005: 669). Our news is filled with personal stories of success and despair, our television is saturated with the melodrama of the 'real' lives of 'ordinary' individuals staged on TV through contrived scenarios, produced for entertainment, focusing on the personal and the spectacular (Wood and Skeggs 2008), and our policymakers use individual narrative vignettes to promote their causes. As Chase cautions, we need to be wary of 'the extraordinary self-conscious fascination with story telling that prevails at present.' (Chase 2005: 212) The creation of what Berlant (2008) calls 'intimate publics' through such story telling links to political processes that work at the level of sensation and emotion (Wood and Skeggs 2008). In educational contexts, Ecclestone (2004; 2007) has raised concerns about what she describes as a therapeutic turn, where students are encouraged to tell their personal stories and explore their emotions in the public space of schools. Though not intended for sensation and spectacle, Ecclestone argues that such practices diminish individuals and provide the state with new opportunities for surveillance and control.

Narrative and life history research face the challenge that they too may open up personal lives and experience for scrutiny, but do no more than satisfy the curiosity of a wider audience, if this is not linked to what Lincoln and Denzin (2005: 1117) call 'an engaged social science'. This is what Goodson and Sikes (2001) mean when they make the distinction between life story and life history. Life stories may be a starting point, the initial exploration of a life as lived, but life history grounds these stories of personal experience in their

wider social and historical context, and pays attention to social relations of power.

The distinction above hints at the multiple layering of narrative research. An important recognition in narrative inquiry is that narratives are collaborative constructions, and involve different participants in their construction. These include the subjects of the inquiry (who might be termed the 'respondents' in other forms of research), the researchers (who might also be the 'subject' of the research), others who become involved in the inquiry (such as the bi-lingual interpreter in Jane Andrews' chapter in this volume), as well as the readers, who will form their own construction of the text that is presented.

What work can our narratives do?

But we are still faced with questions of what work narratives can do, what insights a study of individual accounts can give us, and how we can learn from a study of the singular. An essential aspect of data relating to the singular and particular rather than to large samples and statistical generalisability is that 'good narratives typically approach the complexities and contradictions of real life.' (Flyvbjerg 2006: 237) They reveal ambiguity rather than tidy it away. In Hodkinson and Hodkinson's words (2001: 4), individual cases 'retain more of the "noise" of real life than many other types of research.' Indeed, as they argue, other forms of research aim to exclude noise, yet 'the excluded noise may be a highly significant part of the story.' This emphasis on context-dependent knowledge makes it possible to develop

a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behaviour is not simply about rule-governed acts (Flyvbjerg 2006). Individual cases and narratives can in this way help us to understand complex inter-relationships (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2001).

In writing the chapters in this book, it is the detail of everyday life that we have aimed to explore. The title of this volume, *Exploring learning, identity and power through life history and narrative research,* identifies the key threads that run through the chapters. All of the chapters are concerned with learning, sometimes, but not always, in formal educational contexts. Questions of identity and power weave in and out of the chapters, offering a diversity of insights into the constructions of identity, and the workings of power, and also showing the spaces and limitations for the taking of power through individual agency. While the authors of each chapter offer their own answers to the question of the purposes of their narratives, I want here to emphasise what is crucial to me, which is the possibility that narrative and life history research might 'speak truth to power' (Coffield 1999; Watts 2008). By this, I mean the ways in which narrative inquiry, through rich accounts of the complexities of real life and an emphasis on the particular, may call into question dominant narratives that do not match the experience of life as lived.

A significant and important feature of narrative and life history research is that they provide a means of getting closer to the experience of those whose lives and histories go unheard, unseen, undocumented - ordinary, marginalised and silenced lives (Riessman 2008). Riessman emphasises how 'Narratives

invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to enter the perspective of the narrator' (2008: 9), that is, the person who is telling their own story to the researcher. This is very different to the way that reality TV encourages us to become voyeurs in the spectacle of the lives of others. Narrative research respects individuals as subjects, with both histories and intentions.

Exploring identity/ies

In focusing on the detail of individual lives, a major concern in narrative inquiry is the construction and enacting of identity/ies. Why does identity matter, and why does it matter now? McCarthey and Moje (2002) argue that identity matters, both because identities shape people's practices and 'because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings.' (McCarthey and Moje 228-9)

At the present time, the significance of identity is heightened by analyses that point to the breakdown of the set 'trajectories' for people's lives. These trajectories may have formed a common experience according to class, gender and ethnic origin in the past (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), but there is no longer a script that can be lived out in a relatively prescribed way. We are forced to cobble together a biography in Beck's (1992) words, to construct our identities, rather than just live out a predetermined path through life. The implication is that it is no longer possible *not* to work on the self.

Narrative research is therefore seen as providing opportunities and spaces for research participants as well as researchers. Riessman (2008) suggests that encouraging and allowing people to tell their narratives to us as researchers allows participants to negotiate their identities and to make meaning of their experience, and Lieblich et al (1998: 7) comment similarly: 'We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell.'

In this respect, narrative and life history research are strongly associated with moves to restore individual agency, that is, to focus on the ways in which individuals may choose to shape their own lives, and a shift away from what Plummer (2001: 4) describes as 'the big stories of the recent past' such as Marxism and earlier forms of feminism, which tend to emphasise how social and economic structures determine individuals' lives. At the same time, various life history and narrative researchers emphasise that it is important to understand individual lives and identities as constructed in the context of particular social structures and material conditions, which lock people into various forms of subjectivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000).

Making sense of life as lived

The role of the researcher in interpreting the stories that are told is therefore a significant one. Biesta, Hodkinson and Goodson (2005) make this point very clearly when they argue that life history research is more than the collection of stories about individuals' lives:

Although the collection of such stories is a crucial first step in life-history research, and although such research is fundamentally interested in the ways in which people 'story' or narrate their own lives, life-history research aims to understand those stories against the background of wider socio-political and historical context and processes. (Biesta et al 2005: 4)

Goodson (2005) also argues that a pre-occupation with the individual life history and its analysis is not enough. This tips into individualism, and a 'fiction' of an isolated, self-sufficient individual. What is central is the relationship between the individual and wider structures – in the words of C. Wright Mills (1970), how smaller milieux and larger structures interact.

Narrative inquiry therefore, goes beyond the telling of stories and involves trying to make sense of life as lived (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). In particular, narrative research can help to make visible taken-for-granted practices, and structural and cultural features of our everyday social worlds (Chase 2005). Chase argues that such work may reveal the stranglehold of oppressive metanarratives, that establish rules of truth, legitimacy and identity.

Engaging in 'little science'

This returns to the question that challenges narrative and life history researchers, including the authors in this book. What is the purpose of our

narratives? What work is it we hope they will do? It is here that I find the words of C. Wright Mills helpful, who says:

> Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making. (Mills 1959: 248)

This is what he calls the sociological imagination, explaining: 'The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society.' (Mills 1959: 12)

However, whilst the connections he makes between biography, history and society are an important touchstone, which is shared by numerous narrative and life history researchers (for example Chase 2005; Goodson 2007; Plummer 2001; and Waller and Brine in this volume), a key aspect of narrative inquiry is also that it is concerned with what Denzin (2008) calls 'little science'. It concerns itself with the small, the local, the fragmented, historically emergent, contradictory and accidental.

While speaking truth to power may therefore include finding ways to make narrative inquiry heard by national and international policymakers, it may also involve what Casey (1995) describes as:

> a reconceptualization of what it means to be "political". Central to this definition is the recognition that the personal is political and, further, that power is exercised in all relationships, not just those connected to the state. (Casey 1995: 223/224)

In the chapters that follow, what stands out clearly, is that possibilities for social change need, at least in part, to be understood and conceived of through the small everyday acts of individuals, and the histories that have brought them to their present place. It is the narratives such as those presented here, that get behind the nowness of current policy-making, and offer not just some sense-making of our increasingly complex lives, but glimpses of the possibilities that are realised in the everyday.

The chapters in this book

This volume starts with a chapter by Pat Sikes which addresses a major concern in narrative inquiry at the present time – the ethics of writing life histories and narratives. Sikes emphasises the responsibilities involved in narrating others' lives – the 'heavy ethical burden' involved - and asks 'what constitutes ethical research and writing practice?' In particular she stresses the power that is invested in the researcher-writer who creates a particular version of reality, and how our own lives, beliefs and values are implicated in our practices, so that we have a duty to explain our positionality in the context of the research.

This point is taken up by the authors of the subsequent chapters. Each of the chapters starts with a reflexive introduction, where the writers talk about their own life histories and identities and how they came to write their chapter, providing a personal contextualisation for the narrative/life history which follows. At the end of each chapter, the authors reflect on the professional and

research implications of the narratives they have presented. But this does not mean that the authors all approach life history and narrative research in the same way. The various chapters deliberately offer diversity rather than uniformity. The authors focus on different subjects and they 'do' narrative research in different ways. The chapters may be read as individual case studies, but they also share common threads in their concern with learning, identity and the workings of power, and how these may be explored through life history and narrative research.

In chapter three, Chris Halse explores processes of 'un/becoming' in the negotiation of teacher identity. She focuses on the experiences of Sue, an elementary school teacher in Australia, and Sue's involvement in introducing an anti-racist Studies of Asia curriculum in her school. The chapter follows Sue as she engages in the challenges of trying to work towards her vision and ideals for the curriculum, within a context where her enthusiasm is not automatically shared. As Halse explains, this account of the life and work of one particular teacher allows her to take up questions of identity and social justice that are central to the broader agenda of life history. She asks: How is 'self' mediated by others? What is the subjective experience of engaging with issues of racial and cultural difference? What historical and personal resources empower or shackle efforts to bring about educational change for social justice? What are the implications for self-formation and the political possibilities of challenging normative ways of seeing and doing?

Elizabeth Newman's chapter also explores the negotiation of professional identity, through the life history of Ed, a gay male primary teacher in England. This narrative of 'otherness' shows how institutional and organizational settings shape 'the selves we live by' (Chase 2005: 659), and how difficult it is to construct a viable identity if you fall outside the norm. Ed's account acts as a mirror to normative assumptions that shape the construction of teachers' lives. While Ed eventually finds a way to construct a viable identity, we, as readers, are made to recognise how taken-for-granted assumptions about who can be a 'teacher', can quickly serve to exclude those who do not conform to these assumptions.

Richard Waller's chapter uses his own life history alongside the accounts of two students taking Access to Higher Education courses in England to show how a biographical approach can reveal the ways in which individual experience is inflected differently by class, gender, and historical moment. He explores how his research participants review and reconstruct their identities as they move through the Access course and on to higher education. Waller emphasises how a life history approach enabled him to uncover how these individual experiences cannot be understood if divorced from social context. Waller's use of a life history approach therefore highlights the ways in which structure and agency may interact in the playing out of individual lives, and the possibilities and constraints that this entails.

A different approach to the preceding chapters is adopted by Shekar Bheenuck. He undertakes an analysis of ten narrative accounts, exploring the

similarities and differences in the experience of nurses who, like himself, came to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s to train and work in the National Health Service. On the one hand, theirs are stories of migration and the construction of new or revised identities when they came to Britain. On the other, the analysis of their accounts reveals the shared experience of discriminatory practices by the white indigenous population, experienced both in their professional and private lives. Bheenuck's chapter provides an alternative and unheard account of overseas nurses' experience of coming to Britain to work. However, as he emphasises at the end of his chapter, these narratives have a wider purpose than to fill a gap in our historical knowledge; they are told with the view that the present and future can and must be different.

Jane Andrews' chapter shifts the focus onto the relationship between the researcher and research participants and the significance of such relationships in the construction of narrative research. Her work on a study of in and out of school learning amongst primary school children in England provides a rich resource for considering the ways in which narratives are shaped by the context of their telling. She discusses in depth the complexities of her positioning in the research process, as she went about gathering the narratives of Saqib, a 10 year old boy from a Pakistani background, and his mother, Farah. She visited them in the family home, and as Farah did not speak English, Andrews first talked to Farah through her son Saqib, and then used an interpreter, adding a further layer or contributor to the narrative. Andrews questions her position as a white, English-speaking researcher, and

the relations of power that this entails in relation to Farah and her son, describing herself as an 'intercultural intruder'. At the same time, she emphasizes the insights that she has been able to gain about the role of learning and school in this family's life, which remain hidden from view in the more formal interactions between home and school.

Dean Smart uses his own life narrative to explore how incidents in his past have shaped his values and practice now. His chapter centres around the question 'Where are we in this story?' This was the question asked of him by minority ethnic pupils in his history lessons in an inner-city school in Bristol. The chapter concerns narrative on two levels. Firstly, it is an account of his own life history, and how that has shaped his positioning in an increasingly diverse and multi-ethnic society. Secondly, it is an exploration of the presence and absence of the narratives of peoples from ethnic minorities, and people of colour, from school history in England. His detailed analysis of the accounts that are told and those that remain untold are used to raise questions about the power of historical narratives to shape our understandings of both the past and the present. His auto/biographical narrative is used alongside this to raise questions about how things might be different, and how that requires the engagement of teachers to enact change.

Nick Clough's chapter also explore the intertwining of personal experience with professional commitments. In examining his own biography, and interweaving this with discussion of his professional practice as an educator, he aims to identify power relations and identify crises that lie at the roots of his

own lifelong learning. He describes events and experiences that have shaped his understandings and values around work on sustainability, and explains how he uses a series of photographs of 'Myself with the Wider World' to develop a similar approach with others. He shows how the interaction of different people's lives can shift and change power relations. Through his own life history he suggests that identities are always in process, and therefore always open to development and change.

The lasting memories of attending secondary school in 1960s England form the basis of Jacky Brine's chapter. Her chapter is a moving auto/biographical account of her own and her contemporaries' recollections of attending 'bilateral' (grammar/secondary modern) schools in Bristol, interwoven with Brine's commentary on the impact of education policy on individual lives and identities. The tension between individual biography and a shared history of time, place and class is at the core of her chapter. Despite the strength of feeling engendered by the memories of the bilateral school, which Brine describes as 'a powerful, pernicious class practice that remains deep inside', she stresses now, looking back, that such experiences are not completely determining. To varying extents and in different ways she and her contemporaries also engaged in the construction of their selves. At the end of her chapter, Brine also suggests that living an unsettled identity can be positive, a constant challenge to the protective screen that may surround the academic researcher.

The penultimate chapter in this collection positions narrative inquiry firmly as an arts-based research practice, both in what it says, and its form of telling. James Rolling describes the writing of his chapter as 'a rite of passage into the uncertainty of now'. At one level, the chapter is an exploration and re-writing of his own biography, particularly his relationship to his father, through a multilayered narrative. At another level, the chapter performs narrative inquiry in a lyrical and discursive manner that invites us to rethink the boundaries within which we research and write. The poem which he includes in the chapter, to convey the 'felt part of the story best', provides an example of the power of different forms of re-presenting ideas. Narrative inquiry, he says, should seek to proliferate new tellings, not redeem facts, and as an arts-based practice, should aim to rearrange the known order from time to time as a test of what is possible and as a catalyst for change.

The volume concludes by revisiting the purposes and value of life history and narrative research by Penelope Harnett. She draws on her background as a historian to connect the narratives presented in this book to ideas and work that span a broader historical context and time frame. Her exploration of the understandings that she developed through reading different chapters in this volume, indicate the relevance of the unfamiliar as well as the familiar in moving our thinking and our practices forward. As this final chapter shows, the richness of narrative inquiry can encourage a revisiting of deeply held beliefs and ideas and a challenging of taken-for-granted assumptions.

We hope that the narratives presented here will provide insights that connect what troubles us with wider concerns about the shaping and construction of what Riessman (2008: 10) calls the 'deep structures' concerning the nature of life in a particular culture. For novice researchers, we hope that through this book, you will gain an insight into why we chose to create the narratives that appear here, and what work we see our narratives doing. If you are embarking on your own research you may find this helpful in thinking about the possibilities of constructing narratives of your own.

As editor alongside Penelope Harnett, what strikes me forcefully is that the chapters in this book demonstrate that narrative inquiry is not simply one amongst a range of means of doing and reporting research. Engaging in narrative and life history research involves an investment of the self, a commitment to the issues being addressed, and a desire to create re-presentations that reflect our own commitments. I end this introduction with a fleeting glimpse of that commitment, from an email sent with one of the chapters in this book. It could stand for all of us:

One last edit! Sorry, to keep tinkering but this one is special to me. No more wordsmithing for now. (James Rolling, email, 17 April 2009)

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