
Using Biographical Methods in Adult Education Research

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27th April, 5 p.m. (UK/ Portuguese Time, 6 p.m. CET Time)

The focus of this lecture is to look at the role and value of using biographical methods in adult education research. The ‘turn’ to biographical methods (Chamberlayne et al, 2000) in the social sciences was a reaction to the dominance of scientific and objective approaches which dehumanises human behaviour and reduces people’s lives to statistics. Instead, biographical research offers a subjective and humanistic approach (Plummer, (2001) to understanding people’s lives. Unlike quantitative methods biographical research ‘offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds. Self and other’ (Merrill & West, 2009). The engagement with biographical methods in adult education research has been, and still is, dominant in Europe particularly but also beyond (West et al, 2007). Importantly biographical research enables us as researchers and adult educators to grasp an in-depth understanding of the complexities and nuances of learning in adults’ lives in a way which promotes a collaborative and critical approach to adult education. As Patricia Gouthro asserts biographical methods are important and useful for ‘adult educators working from an emancipatory framework’ (2014, 87). Biographical research has been crucial in giving voice to the marginalised and highlighting oppression such as class, gender and race inequalities.

In my research I draw predominantly on feminist biographical approaches to research but also symbolic interactionism. Giving voice is central to the feminist stance. Feminists advocate for a subjective and intersubjective engagement between the researcher and the researched thus challenging and breaking down power differences to establish a more democratic relationship.

I will illustrate the power of biographies through the voices of adult students I have interviewed. My research has focused on the experiences of working-class adult students in higher education. Their stories, although individual, reveal collective experiences and commonalities of classed, gendered, and for some, raced lives in relation to higher education, family and community.

References

- Gouthro, P (2014) Stories of learning across the lifespan: Life history and biographical research in adult education, *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, Vol. 20 (1), pp87 - 103
- Merrill, B. & West. L. (2009). *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*, London, Sage.
- West, L., Alheit, P., Andersen, A. S., & Merrill, B. (2007) Eds,) *Using Biographical and life History Approaches in the Study of Adult and Lifelong Learning: European Perspectives*, Frankfurt-am-Main, Peter Lang

Dr Barbara Merrill

Barbara is an Emeritus Professor/Dr in the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick, UK. Her research interests include issues of class and gender inequality in relation to the learning experiences and the learner identity of adult students, particularly in higher education, community education and European comparative research. Barbara's research method centres on the use of biographical narrative approaches in order to understand the lived experiences of adult students. Her publications largely focus on the experiences of non-traditional students and biographical methods. She is a member of the Steering Committee for ESREA (European Society for Research on the Education of Adults) and co-coordinates the ESREA Access, Learning Careers and Identities Network. She is an editorial board member of the following journals: *Studies in the Education of Adults* and *RELA* (European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults).