The adolescent narrator: exploring the use of biographical research methods with young people in further education experiencing mental health issues.

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Abstract: This work forms part of a PhD research project entitled, ‘How do we manage and support students experiencing mental health issues in further education?’. In this study I am investigating the different forms of mental health issues experienced by students aged 16-19 from the student perspective and how their mental health status and experiences has impacted on their life and learning careers. This study also seeks to assess levels of college staff knowledge about student mental health and establish how staff, currently support students with mental health issues. In the wider context, I am also concerned with how a large further education institution utilises internal and external services in supporting such students.

This paper explores the rationale for selecting biographical research as a methodology in gathering data in the initial phase of the project in the form of narratives. This was done to provide an opportunity for participants to have a ‘voice’ and was accessorised with additional data provided in the form of life path continuums. Although the process did not set out to be that of therapy, several participants engaged in the study commented on the ‘therapeutic effects’ telling their life story had. In talking about their life stories, participants were potentially engaged in understanding and clarifying something that may not have been understood before. Therefore, how the interviewee views himself/herself and their experiences within the process, as well as the role of the researcher and their relationship
with the participant, impacts on whether the process is an enabling or inhibiting form of inquiry.

**College context**

The college environment utilised in this study, is a large FE establishment which offers full and part time courses to 16-19 year olds and adult learners aged 19+. These are predominantly vocational courses, however some traditional academic routes for example A levels, are provided. Wenhill College is located in the south west region of the UK and incorporates a large geographical catchment area of both urban and rural areas. It includes 4 main campuses and several outreach centres across the county. These outreach centres provide part time courses for adult learners. The college also enrols a small percentage of full time international students each year across the main campus sites. The ethnicity profile for this regional college is predominantly white British but includes a small percentage of African-Caribbean students. I would suggest that this profile does not compare to an inner city FE college, as would be found in a large town/city but is probably typical of similar geographical locations around the UK. Data for the previous two academic years, 06/07 and 07/08, show total enrolments for full time 16-19 year olds as 3811 and 3805 respectively. In 06/07, 1992 were male and 1819 were female and in the following year, 1959 were male and 1846 female. Students who progress onto post compulsory education within this college do so pre-dominantly from numerous local secondary schools in the locality, whilst others transfer from other colleges within the region, some even from further afield.

**Introduction**

In this exploratory paper, which needs to be viewed as work in progress, I discuss and explore the use of biographical research with a purposive, homogeneous sample of individual adolescents as part of the project, *'How do we manage and support students experiencing mental health issues in further education?'*. I am interested in identifying the different forms of mental health issues experienced by adolescents aged 16 -19, particularly those studying in the further education sector. I also want to explore the lives of the participants prior to their engagement with post compulsory education and how their experiences of mental health issues may have impacted on their life and learning careers. In a wider context, I am interested in finding out how personal experiences contribute to the development of individual identities within social and cultural structures and that of further education. This paper will not discuss in great detail the ethical issues surrounding the use of biographical research in this study, nor do I intend to define mental health. However I
acknowledge the complexities and importance of both these topics whilst recognising the requirement of a lengthy, detailed discussion and expansion elsewhere.

Rationale

When commencing this project, I planned to use qualitative research methods as I believed this would enable me to gather data from individuals which would provide an insight into their experiences in an in-depth way. This was in preference to quantitative research methods which I believed lacked the scope to gather data rich in information and would merely skim the surface of the topic in question. By selecting this approach, I aimed to adopt a flexible and iterative style of eliciting data, which permitted openness both in the questions and prompts on my part as a researcher. By employing open ended questions and prompts I hoped to evoke responses which were meaningful and culturally salient to the participant and rich and explanatory in nature. Although I recognise there are key strengths and limitations in both these methods of inquiry, I wished to pursue the implementation of the former for this study. Part of my original proposal was to use what I defined as life history research methods in the initial phase, that is, in simplistic terms, engaging participants who had experienced mental health difficulties and seeking their life stories which I could then ‘tell’. The process is far more complex than it initially seemed; as is recognising and defining the methodology I have employed. The initial data collection phase has enabled me to consider whether I have gathered life histories or narratives, which include other elements of the participants’ biographies.

Origins of the biographical method

Biographical research whether it be life history, first person narratives, case studies or auto/biographies, is not a new phenomenon but has a long history of ‘cultural practice’ according to Mascuch (1997). Goodson and Sikes (2001) suggest the origin of the life history method dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century in the form of autobiographies of American Indian Chiefs, which were collected by anthropologists. However, Roberts (2002) suggests that evidence of life history research pre-dates this and refers to examples of religious discourses from the Protestant Reformation during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

A key point in the development of life history research methods occurred during the 1920s following a large scale study carried out by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920), *The Polish*
Peasant in Europe and America. The study relied mainly on autobiographical accounts of Polish migrants but also included letters and diaries (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). The publication of this work helped develop the concept of life history research as a tangible method. Furthermore, significant modern literary sources refer to the development of life history research approach as intrinsically linked to the University of Chicago and the work of William Thomas and Robert Park in the early part of the twentieth century (Roberts, 1977; 2002, Goodson and Sikes, 2001, Plummer, 2001). The use of the life history method was further developed at this time as a research tool in an effort to understand the lives of individuals and the variety of different cultural groups in the city. Park oversaw a range of studies about city life and the use of the life history method was strongly evident, none more so than Clifford Shaw’s account of a ‘mugger’ titled The Jack Roller (1930) and The Professional Thief published by Cornwell and Sutherland (1937).

What was it about these particular studies, employing life history methods that stimulated interest and popularity? Becker (1970) suggests that one major strength of the life history method was that it “provides a voice from a culture and situation that are ordinarily not known to intellectuals generally and to sociologists in particular” (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p.7). Becker expands this view referring specifically to The Jack Roller study, “by putting ourselves in Stanley’s skin (the key participant in the study), we can feel and become aware of the deep biases about such people that ordinarily permeate our thinking and shape the kinds of problems we investigate….we can begin to see what we take for granted, and ought not to in designing our research – what kinds of assumptions are embedded in the way we set the questions we study.” Becker’s argument considers a number of issues, in particular the importance of empathy (‘by putting ourselves in Stanley’s skin’). This also raises further issues relating to pre-empted assumptions about an individual and challenges researchers, in particular life historians, to reflect and consider personal biases and how this may influence our approach to life history research (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

The Chicagoan approach to studying city life lost its appeal during the late 1930s and 1940s, hence the life history method also fell out of favour. Life history research has never been widely accepted by mainstream researchers in the social sciences but accepted by others including Becker (1978) Bertaux (1983) Faraday and Plummer (1979) and Fischer (1983). Denzin (1989) suggests this was due to several reasons including concerns from other quarters of the research community that life history research lacked credibility, validity and reliability and was subjective rather than objective thus relegating it to the fringes of methodological acceptability, below the preference and role of ‘more rigorous’ methodologies (Muchmore, 1999). Comparably, traditional research methods which became
significantly dominant at that time included “scientific” hypothetico-deductive methods. These were considered more valid and credible as they required the construction of a hypothesis which could be proved or disproved, as the case maybe. Biographical research in its many forms was deemed ‘wanting’ when measured against criteria of reliability and validity but considered an insightful source for possible hypotheses (Becker, 1970). Mills (1959/1970) criticised what he considered “dangerous but popular trends in social science research” at that time (Plummer, 2001, p.4). These trends were dichotomous in that one focussed on methodology and the other theory. These counter positions of positivism and realism, refute the life story as a key method in social science work because the approach lacks scientific basis and therefore generalisable laws and characteristics of quantification. Consequently it was not until the 1960s that life history research experienced a revival within sociological research and the subsequent interest in life stories has maintained its usage and growing popularity within this context, as well as in education, health studies and psychology.

Biographical research – defining terms

Roberts (2002) uses the term ‘biographical research’ and indicates the scope of the field which fits within/under this wider term, whereby various and often interrelated approaches to the study of individuals takes place. Biographical research employs qualitative methods and seeks to understand the personal experiences of individuals in their day-to-day lives and the appeal of biographical research, in its multitude of forms, is because it explores how individual life experiences can be understood within cultural and structural settings. Denzin (1989) indicates there is much scope for the use of biographical research and various terms combine to shape this method including biography, autobiography, ethnography, narrative, case study, oral history, life history and life story.

Plummer (1983) suggests that the kinds of materials deemed relevant are also varied and include what he refers to as ‘personal documents’ or ‘documents of life’. These may include diaries, letters, auto/biographies and other materials (Denzin, 1989). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) refer to such documents as ‘field texts’ and suggest the production of these texts prior to the research can be used differently. This is the case in this study whereby participants are asked to prepare a visual representation of their life in the form of a life path continuum. Plummer (2001) refers to such documents as ‘accessories to a life story’ and I will discuss their role in greater detail at a later stage. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest these documents outline oral history, family stories and chronicles, photographs, personal and family artefacts, journals, letters and conversations. Hence, documents may be written for different purposes and audiences, at the time of the event or later.
Reinharz (1992) raises the issue of the differing use of terms and their interchangeable use, which include terminology such as life histories, life stories, oral history, personal narrative, biography and autobiography. However, Atkinson (1998) goes so far as to offer a definition clearly distinguishing the two terms of life story and life history.

“A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another.”

(Atkinson, 1998 p.8)

He goes onto suggest that a life story is the essence of what has happened to a person and includes what the individual considers important events, experiences and feelings and by recounting our stories, we can gain context and meaning. Atkinson also suggests there is little difference between a life story and a life history, just differing terms for the same thing, whereas Denzin (1970), refers to life history as a process of collecting, interpreting and reporting of the life in question. This is commonly known as the life history method and is constructed from various sources to relate to the story. Therefore, the term life story is often applied to the narrated story by the author while life history infers the later interpretative, presentational work of the researcher (Roberts, 2002).

In an effort to clarify and define a variety of approaches which come under the heading of biographical research, including case history, life history, ethnography, narrative, life story, oral history and autobiography to highlight just a few (Denzin, 1989); I felt it was necessary for my personal understanding and interpretation to have insight and comprehension about the differing terms and approaches which are included under this apparently wider, encompassing term. Prior to exploring any specific literature, I sought basic definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary relating to biography, history and narratives.

‘Biography…a written account of a person’s life (usually by another)
‘History…a continuous, usually chronological record of important (past) events, especially human affairs ; a systematic or critical account of or research into past event(s)’
‘Narratives…a spoken or written account of connected events in order of happening’ and in addition,

Narrator…a person who delivers a commentary.’

On immediate reflection, all of the above terms are applicable to my study, particularly phase one of the data collection process. However, this is a simple response to a complex issue
whereby consideration needs to be afforded to differing participants and their roles in the research process. Who plays which part? The historian, the biographer, the narrator?

Plummer (2001, p.3) summarises the complexities of conflicting literature surrounding this particular methodological style and acknowledges the various names and guises which have been applied to this method. “This particular methodological style has gone by various names – personal documents, the documentary tradition, oral history; and it connects to an array of different styles of qualitative talk that have been developing over the past century.” For sociologists however, it has most regularly been identified as ‘human documents’ – accounts of individual experience which reveal the individual’s actions as a human and as a participant in social life (Blumer, 1979).

The narrativist turn

The use of life narratives in academic study is generally considered to have stemmed from the field of psychology and Freud’s psychoanalytical interpretation of individual case studies (1910; 1911; 1957; 1958), where he applied his (psychoanalytical) theory to individual lives (Atkinson, 1998). Allport (1942) also used personal documents to study personality traits and developments in individuals, where he focussed on primary documents including narratives. Erikson (1958; 1969; 1975) used these methods to explore how lives were influenced by historical moments and events. One of the first researchers to study individual lives using life narratives was Murray (1938; 1955) and he did so in an attempt to understand personality development. Both Sarbin (1986) and Bruner (1986) used narratives to enable the understanding of human experience and as an important means for how lives are constructed, respectively. In the past three decades, narrative has acquired an increasingly high profile in social research and the employment of this approach by psychologists, social scientists and other scholarly disciplines, reflects the broader interest in narrative, by means of highlighting the lives of persons in society (Atkinson, 1998; Squire, 2008).

What is narrative research?

Squire (2008) argues that defining narrative research is in dispute as there are no self-evident categories on which to focus, as there are with content-based thematic approaches, and lack starting or finishing points. Plummer (2001) collaborates there is little detailed agreement as to what narratives are and suggests that a wider net is cast which includes narratives under/within the term of biographical research. He expands this thinking by proposing a combination of several strands of thought, whereby narratives are comprised of
several key elements that require attention. These include considering story, plot, characters, themes, poetics, genres and points of view. In comparison, the Anet Community, Anglia Ruskin University Cambridge (2006) defines narrative as ‘tale, story, recital of facts, especially story told in first person; kind of composition or talk that confines itself to these’, adding the term ‘discourse’ which is designed to represent a connected succession of happenings; in addition, notionally suggesting that narratives have coherence in structure, with a beginning, middle and an end, but that the sequence of narrative clauses in the narration may be different to the original sequence of related events. Personally I like the following definition put forward by Wilensky (1983):

“A narrative is a presentation of a coherent series of actions which the narrator connects with each other. One or more linked stories are used to convey a point.”

This in my opinion is a simplistic explanation of what a narrative is and links clearly to my study methodology and how I have approached data collection in the initial phase of the research process. Thorough data analysis has yet to take place. Plummer’s notion that narratives are comprised of several key elements also fits with the method I am employing and on reflection, having conducted several interviews with student participants I can confirm their narratives include a (life) story as told in their own words supported with a visual accessory, in this case a life path continuum, which represents a plot, inclusive of events and what McAdams (1985) refers to as ‘nuclear episodes’ often identified as specific autobiographical events. In addition, the narratives of life stories include characters and in the case of the adolescents involved in this study, these have included parents, grandparents, siblings, friends and peers as well as teachers, counsellors and doctors, to name but a few.

Themes and story lines are closely linked to plot(s) and are key themes that start to organise a life (Plummer, 2001). Again McAdams (1985) suggests that thematic lines are recurrent content clusters in stories, linking to power and intimacy, agency and communion thus representing the link between themes, story lines and plots. A surfacing example of this in my study is the parent-sibling relationship whereby a recurring theme in all the completed interviews to date has highlighted previous and/or recurring mental health problems experienced by one or both parents, and in most cases, that of the mother.

In Plummer’s opinion (2001), genres and structures, whereby clustering imagoes and thematic lines, lead to narratives eventually becoming recognisable and performing as definite functions. White (1973) considers that plots may be comic, tragic, satirical even romantic. Frye (1988) also agrees that plots may be comedic as well as romantic but also
Ironic. This is merely a small selection of highlighted but relevant literature and various researchers/social scientists including Levi-Strauss (1966) and Elsbree (1982) consider other modes of analysing a life story or narrative. But in whose opinion is the plot designated as tragic, comedic, romantic and/or ironic? Is the identification of the theme directed and promoted by that of the narrator telling the story in the first instance or is its nature depicted and interpreted by the person recounting and relating the story to a wider audience? Arguably, is it the audience or the researcher presenting the account who ultimately decide what the story’s theme is? This is where the importance of Labov and Waletsky’s 1967 model comes into play in helping to understand narrative structure, clauses in the narration and the original sequence of related events. This model is considered a seminal sociolinguistic approach which divides narratives clauses into 6 types and as follows:

- Abstract – initial summary of narrative
- Orientation – for example information relating to time, place and participants
- Complication – reports what happened next
- Evaluation – interpretation of the consequences
- Resolution – resolution of actions or result(s)
- Coda – bringing the narrator to present/conclusion of relevant information not part of the story

In 1997, Labov added the importance of issues of the transfer of narrators experience to the audience whereby the biography of the speaker, the circumstances of narration, credibility, the narrator’s theory of causality and allocation of praise and/or blame including the narrator’s viewpoint in shaping narrative, links with my previous comments relating to roles, opinions and themes. Labov illuminates the narrator as an exponent of cultural norms, thus acting in favour of and promoting the idea.

What is not in doubt is the favourable opinions shared by those who recognise narratives as a valid method of qualitative data collection and this has become more apparent having explored the literature. Why is narrative a popular methodology within social research? The narrative turn can be associated with many other social-scientific moves during the past 25 years. Squire (2008) believes this shift has moved towards employing previously less favoured, less popular methods and includes directional ‘turns’ to qualitative methods including biographical, participant-centred research, focussing on the social, cultural and ethical issues in society. It is also evident that biographical methods, in particular narratives and life story/history research, are used diversely across other disciplines including
education, health, social care and politics. Sikes (in Clough, 2002) suggests that narrative offers an exciting, exploratory, important and contemporary way forward in educational research. In addition, Redwood (1999) recognises that narrative research offers the researcher and reader of narrative research a thrill from entering into another’s story and the growing popularity of this work allows a glimpse of unfamiliarity or from identifying with the well known. Here she is referring to narrative research in the context of health and goes on to expand by suggesting, ‘Nurses know patients through the stories patients tell, and nurses respond with stories of their own. The knowledge the nurse gains about a patient is extended into further narratives when conveyed to others; stories are told about stories and narratives thus become a form of social interaction.’ (p.674). Roberts (2002) believes that the collective appeal of biographical research, in its multitude of forms, is because it explores how individual life experiences can be understood within cultural and structural settings. Researchers employing biographical methods are helping to record major (and minor) changes in society and not simply at a broad social level. He goes on to suggest that biographical research informs the understanding of major social shifts experienced and interpreted by individuals, families, groups, communities and institutions.

Methodological issues

Those who favour employing this approach argue that biographical research in whichever guise is a holistic, dynamic process incorporating the participants’ retrospective life experiences and the researcher’s interpretations (Admi, 1995). This method facilitates the gathering and study of lifelong data, allowing him or her to explore a variety of experiences and relationships and to examine changes over time (Haglund, 2004). To use the metaphor of a life as a text suggests it is rooted in the work of anthropologists such as Brown (1987), Bruner (1986) and Winner (1978) whereby human experiences can only be expressed and understood through symbolic statements, which are in essence social texts (Muchmore, 1999).

As I have previously mentioned, the use of biographical methods in research has experienced fashionable identity predominantly during the 1920s and 1930s, followed by a hiatus in the 1940s and 1950s. The languishing of biographical research was caused by its apparent subjectiveness and as Goodson and Sikes (2001) propose, it persistently failed the ‘objectivity tests’. Quantitative research generated numerical and statistical data and was therefore considered representative, whereas biographical studies were not judged to be so and their contributions to theory were treated with caution. Munro (1998) in Goodson and Sikes (2001, p.15) puts forward the notion that biographical research, which includes life
history and narratives, has experienced a revival, particularly within the context of sociological work:

“The current focus on acknowledging the subjective, multiple and partial nature of human experience has resulted in a revival of life history methodology. What were previously criticisms of life history, its lack of representativeness and its subjective nature, are now its greatest strength.”

In addition, biographical research has also experienced resurgence in popularity in the field of education (Casey, 1993; Cole, 1994; Cole and Knowles, 1994; and Goodson, 1992) this is because researchers such as Denzin (1989a), Donmoyer (1990), Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Kirk and Miller (1986) begun to question the appropriateness of using the concepts of validity and reliability as criteria for evaluating qualitative research methods.

However, there are methodological issues to consider when engaging in biographical research. Munro (1998) reflects constructively that he cannot ‘collect’ lives and that narrative does not necessarily provide a better way in locating the truth. In this particular instance he is referring to his study of women teachers and acknowledges that ‘all good stories are predicated on the quality of the fiction.’ He suggests that we all live many lives and that these lives (women teachers) cannot be presented in neat, chronological order as this would serve as an act of injustice by trying to fit these women’s lives into categories and cultural norms. “…My understanding of a life suggests that we need to attend to the silences as well as what is said, …to how the story is told as well as what is told or not told, and to attend to the tensions and contradictions rather than succumb to the temptations to gloss over these in our desire for ‘the’ story.” Here Munro has started to highlight a number of issues relating to methodology and ethical practice within the context of biographical research.

Fine (1994) supports this view and identifies further issues to be confronted when using biographical research methods:

“Self and Other are knottingly entangled. This relationship, as lived between researchers and informants, is typically obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance and laminating the contradictions…Slipping into a contradictory discourse of individualism, persona-logic theorising and de-contextualisation, we inscribe the Other, strain to white out Self and refuse to engage the contradictions that litter our texts.”


I considered Fine’s warning valuable in preparation for engaging in the initial data collection phase of my study and on reflection, essential. The relationship of the researcher and the
informant requires definitive boundaries and an objective approach on both the parts of the researcher and informant, however by its nature, this particular research method lends itself to subjectiveness and as Munro (1998) suggests, this is a key strength.

Fine’s quote leads me on to consider other issues and in the first instance, the way in which people do narrate their lives and not how I as a researcher, believe they should. Collecting life stories within biographical research represent lives which are interpreted and formed in texts. Freeman (1998) describes these as not lives themselves but texts of lives that recount what an individual’s life was like.

Goodson (1992a) suggests there is a distinctive difference between ‘layers’. In the first instance, the translating of the lived experience into a life story is considered the first interpretive layer, followed by the second layer and interpretation to create a life history or narrative of a life. The whole notion and role of the researcher involves various levels of process and power and raises issues relating to methodology and ethical practices and although narrative can be regarded as both phenomenon and method, the term ‘story’ is usually used to describe participant narrator tells and the narrative, is the researcher’s account (Redwood, 1999). Bertaux (1981) notes, that there is potential risk and harm in this process between the researcher and informant’s relationship. Goodson and Sikes (2001) refer to this process as ‘colonising’ whereby the researcher seeks to locate the story as a life history or narrative within a historical context. However, they consider there is a need for providing an historical context including the need to contextualise changing lives in time and space.

The role of the researcher in life history research appears to be a multi-faceted one and various researchers engaged in this type of research endeavour to explain, in some cases definitively, what this role entails. Goodson and Sikes (2001) refer to clearly identifiable roles within the context of a biographical interview(s) – the story teller or narrator and the interpreter. Plummer (1983) also draws attention to ‘what makes a good informant’ again emphasising the value of willing participation on the part of the interviewee. So assuming there are two key people involved in this process, consideration needs to be given to the researcher’s role in planning, organising, facilitating, transcribing, data selection and analysis, formulating and evaluating the research process and representation too.

Dollard (1949) argues that biographical research offers a way of exploring the relationship between the culture, the social structure and individual lives. Whereas, McLaughlin and Tierney (1993) refer to this method as a way in which ‘silenced or hidden lives’ can be
expressed and celebrated. Bearing in mind these respective positions, consideration can be
given to the researcher’s role and the opportunity provided for the participant.

Roberts (2002) suggests that traditionally researchers have had an objective role which
involves questioning, interpreting and presenting, in whatever form, the finished research
text. Notably however, the emphasis has moved in a slightly different direction whereby the
researcher is asked to indicate their presence in the research, giving consideration to the
reflexivity of their role and the influence of social background including gender, race or social
class. But how and what of themselves, if anything, should a researcher include or disclose
in the interview process? Sparkes (1994a) believes that this may lead to ‘narcissistic
intrusion’ directing the emphasis of the interview away from that of the informant resulting in
influencing the situation detrimentally for the informant in the first instance, but also possibly
the researcher and overall research process.

Wider literature sources share similar concerns to those of Sparkes and question the validity
of ‘personal investment’ and knowing what and how much to reveal about the self in sharing
stories, likening this situation to that of a psychiatric or therapeutic interview technique
whereby personal disclosure on the part of the interviewer is considered a risk as it
potentially creates an aspect of vulnerability. However, an argument here could be that due
consideration should be given to the informant as they are ultimately vulnerable and
‘exposed’ merely by the nature of this method and Rogers (1945) espoused the importance
of warmth and empathy, thus the interviewer in their role needs to consider their strategies.

Atkinson (1998, p.33) talks about the primary role of the researcher in life story interviewing,
as ‘a guide for a journey the two of you are embarking on.’ He describes the role using the
language of a job description, ‘There is a clear, specific task at hand and your job consists of
knowing what questions to ask, how to ask them and when.’ He goes on to explain that the
role of a guide can be rewarding and requires skills to keep the interview going, looking out
for signals and following up questions or comments. He clearly views the interviewer’s role
as a facilitative one which requires specific skills in order to carry out the role effectively,
including the ability to build trust, rapport and credibility. Also, the ability to be able to
communicate effectively, in particular, listening well, and recognising that the interview is not
a conversation although it may appear as one. An interview allows the researcher to ask
questions in greater detail than you would in a conversation with someone who could be a
relatively unknown or complete stranger (Atkinson, 1998).
Dollard (1949) and McLaughlin and Tierney (1993) collectively refer to biographical research as exploratory and expressive, a means in which researchers can on behalf of the informant, highlight and create an understanding of individual’s experiences, as told by them and by acknowledging that intrusion takes place, not merely through the interviewing process but by transcribing, editing and interpreting the data. They also suggest that the reliability of biographical research relies heavily on the relationship between the researcher and informant and ultimately the potential creation of bias. However, they summarise by referring to the researcher’s ability to ‘represent the informant’s subjective reality’ and essentially his or her definition of the situation. This creates a platform of responsibility on the part of the researcher but also one of considerable power (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Goodson and Sikes (2001, p.20) suggest narrative and life history research is an approach best suited to people who are able to listen attentively and beyond what is actually being said, and who can ask pertinent questions in a non-threatening manner. “It demands the willingness to share one’s own experiences, if this seems appropriate, and, of supreme importance, it requires the researcher to be the sort of person that people want to talk to.”

This is all well and good if I were to merely consider the role of the researcher in this approach, but what of the participants, the ‘story tellers’? Due consideration needs to be given to potentially vulnerable adolescents and whether this method is an appropriate means of gathering data.

**Listening to voices : Methodological rationale**

Young people are arguably marginalised in terms of their social, cultural and ideological ‘power’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001) and further marginalised or their voices even missing (Corbett, 1996). Recognising that some voices are difficult to hear because of lack of conventional communication resources, hesitant or inarticulate delivery and a marginalised social status, links with the nature of this study and its relation to adolescents experiencing mental health issues (Charmaz, 2008). As interest in the voices of children and young people increases in popularity, so has interest in methods for engaging with those voices whereby participatory methods aim to reflect, explore and disseminate the views, concerns feelings and experiences of research participants from their own perspective (Swain and French, 1998).

By selecting to use biographical research methods in the form of life stories and consequently producing narratives, I aimed to provide a meaningful way for the adolescent participants to construct their own stories and contribute to a better understanding of their experiences through these stories and of their mental health, life and educational
experiences. All participating adolescents in my study were asked to prepare a life path continuum (LPC), preferably in a visual format, which was then used as a discussion tool in the initial interview. By choosing to use this accessory I intended to combine the visual with the interview, thus creating visual data (Plummer, 2001). The individual’s LPC is unique and created a visual representation of their life from birth to present, thus combining verbal and visual data. Ultimately, the LPC has proved a complementary and useful tool for eliciting in-depth data and explanations but also have allowed the participant to maintain central locus of control. This has aided the initial data collection phase positively, as I had concerns relating to my role as a researcher, power distribution and whether or not participants would treat the process like therapy. Further benefits of employing the LPC include helping to reduce pressure which 1:1 dialogue and sustained eye contact induces, as well as the added pressure of knowing the interview is being recorded for transcribing purposes. The LPC has provided a personalised approach and empowered participants rather than incapacitating them (Wiles et al, 2007).

**Current reflections**

Early indications are that this approach works well with participating adolescents. They have the necessary skills, including recall, insight, interest, and attention span to narrate their life stories. They also have had enough life experiences to conduct a number of meaningful interviews, usually 2 or 3 and totalling 3 hours collectively and on completion are considered short life stories as they are focused and will possibly be presented as one of a series. These life stories are being specifically solicited and gathered for the purpose of assisting me as a researcher to identify and understand the experiences of individual adolescents, their mental health difficulties and the impact this may have had or has, on their life and/or learning careers.

For this study, a life path continuum was a useful way to organise the interviews, as the participants organised their experiences chronologically. This enhanced participant congruence. During the recruitment and consent processes, the participants were informed that they would be asked to tell their life story from when they were born to the present. This information helped them to prepare in advance of their first interview. During the interviews, they responded thoughtfully to questions about their lives and appeared to be making some connections or insights as they related their stories.

I think young people experiencing mental health problems feel vulnerable and therefore by employing a humanistic approach to the interviewing process as espoused by Rogers (1945), I have created an empathic, non-directive interview environment. The advantages of utilising
this approach enhance the respondent-researcher relationship and encourage appropriate expression/reflection and disclosure on the part of the respondent, whilst maintaining the individual's rights and interview boundaries. Life story/narrative research requires holism and not separation and this is particularly relevant in the context of further education and my research. The nature of the study involves inviting students aged 16-19 to participate. However, they must ‘fit’ a specific criteria that is, to have experienced or be experiencing a mental health issue. Holism is important here as I wish to interview participants who fulfil many roles including adolescent, student and someone who has experienced mental health issues.

By asking participants to discuss and reflect on their experiences, I am actively encouraging them to reminisce and this approach has its own set of practical and ethical issues. Coleman (1991) and Thompson (1988) refer to issues when using this approach with older people and how a therapeutic role may arise on the part of the researcher. Although their studies focused around older people, it is worth considering their findings in the context of my study as individuals experiencing mental health problems may seek a therapeutic environment which is far from appropriate. One participant commented that they found the process “really therapeutic”, another that, “I’m really enjoying this” indicating some level of therapeutic benefit. This has not been entirely surprising given that the approach I have elected to employ clearly links with my previous discussion relating to researcher reflexivity, power and control and how the participant views themselves within the process and context of the study. Goodson and Sikes (2001) refer to power in a number of ways and not solely on the part of the researcher. They also refer to ‘colonising’ when discussing moving a life story into narrative, which ultimately gives the researcher a great deal of power and the respondent very little. Therefore it is important to recognise power and influence in many different contexts and not solely in the research person sense. Given these scenarios, clear boundaries have been set and maintained, and appropriate support networks are in place, prior to the research being carried out.

False memory syndrome or ‘saying what they think you want to hear’ is a multi-faceted issue and includes a number of key factors, linking strongly to the issue of power. The nature of this research is that of a personal approach and by carrying out interviews with various individuals on a one to one basis, these situations allow for influential control on the part of the researcher, in particular non-verbal communication. Also if the respondent is overwhelmed or ‘overpowered’ by the researcher, the environment or nature of enquiry, there is a significant possibility they will respond by telling the researcher what they think they want to hear. Similar experiences have been encountered in group interviews where the input of the group members has influenced individual’s responses (Tuckman, 1972). This
behaviour potentially raises questions around validity and bias, even though the behaviour of the researcher may be on a sub conscious level. In conjunction with this discussion, the question of memory and its fallibility in recollecting memories and past experiences creates other difficulties for the researcher (Roberts, 2002). Issues arise around selected and falsified memories, how they are reordered and constructed on the part of the respondent (and researcher) and whether or not ‘all is fiction’ (Robins, 1995). In addition, some adolescents’ memories of their early childhoods are less clear than their memories of their school-age and adolescent years. This might make it difficult to date early experiences, to track where families have lived and moved from, and to understand early household composition (Haglund, 2004). This has been the case with one participant in my study to date. Interestingly it did not directly effect the interview content, merely finite details relating to age. In this situation the participant referred to their LPC and used significant life events to gauge their age, for example birth of a sibling, separation of parents and ‘when I was little’ and noticeably in other interviews, recollections of early memories are formed by the participant on information they have been told or gleaned, usually from family members.

Conclusion
Regardless of whether this method is considered life history or narrative research, it rarely involves a random sample of participants and this is the case here. The research is purposive and is concerned with specific characteristics (ie. students and mental health, aged 16-19) so participants are selected because they meet the criteria and will be sampled because of more specific eligibility. It is convenient because the researcher has relatively easy access to the participants and also it is homogeneous as this element of the research focuses on a small group, whereby participants share common experiences, attributes or characteristics (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

Employing a biographical research method with adolescents in this study provides contextual data and helps me to gain an understanding of their life and a deeper understanding of the context within which that person’s life is situated. This view is supported by Cole & Knowles (2001) whereby contextualising the backdrop that influences how a life is lived and interpreted informs one’s worldview, through which events, thoughts, experiences, and relationships are filtered and assigned meaning. Context is not the unit of analysis in life story research but is critical to the eventual understanding of a life, an event within a life, or a particular experience. Data generated by the life story approach are characterized by the richness and complexity of contextual information (Sandelowski, 1991; Haglund, 2003).
I am using life story interviews in this study as I intend to place the young people participating centrally, thus creating a focal point around their views in preference to the approach used by other researchers, whereby staff and internal/external support services are targeted for their views and opinions. By recognising the participants as collaborative partners, I aim to encourage participant’s reflections and interpretations, thus yielding data to help me gain insight into how past life events and relationships have influenced their experiences and lives. It is what I then do with the data I solicit, how I collate and present this, that will clarify and define its identity as life histories or narratives. Essentially though, biographical research is research that starts from and focuses on the personal and subjective perceptions and experiences of individual people. Where it goes next and what form it then takes depends on the particular variant(s) being employed. Without exception though, biographical approaches that are concerned with locating the individual within the wider social, cultural and historical context they live in, use sociological and/or psychological theory as tools to explain and interpret (Sikes, 2007)

**Concluding remarks**

I am currently nearing completion of the initial phase of data collection and I consider current reflections relating to the process useful but recognise that the data analysis process will enrich my knowledge and understanding of the study topic. Further evaluations need to take place as to whether I have enabled the participants to have a voice, be heard and listened to.

I have valued the levels of trust participating students have vested in me, particularly when it has been verbalised and not merely intuited. Given the power inequalities that have always existed in the research process and have done so in this study, regardless of emphatic attempts on my part to minimise this, I have managed to engage young people in the project based on effective communication, trust and respect without needing to coerce them to do so and they have taken part because they wanted to. One particular female participant aged 17 volunteered as to why she has taken part, “I decided to take part because I wanted my story to be heard and my experiences shared and who knows, it might help other people who’ve had similar experiences to me or even prevent other people from suffering like I have.”

It is realistic to think that when faced with an adult, especially an adult ‘expert’ privileged with a certain amount of academic authority and in the case of my study, clinical mental health knowledge, (potential) participants may feel threatened and overwhelmed by what could be an intrusive process leading to damaging and traumatic reminiscence. I am unable to
dismiss this as a possibility but have considered the potential and real ethical dilemmas in detail.

This opinion is echoed to some degree by Burgess (1989) who states “…a common theme…for handling ethical dilemmas in research is the notion that there is no solution to the problems identified by researchers.” (p.8) He goes on to suggest that if this is the case, researchers need to regularly reflect on their work, in order to develop their understanding of the ethical implications associated with social and educational research.

“Refraining from doing research is not the solution to the problem.”

(Bronfenbrenner, 1952, p.453)
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