

Collective Biography Writing – Theoretical Foundations, Methods and Outline of the Research Procedure

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Abstract

The article describes the innovative method of qualitative research, Collective Biography Writing (CBW), which is not well known or not known at all in the pedagogical research of the region of Central and Eastern Europe. This method is especially useful in the re-exploration of issues connected with being, becoming, development, and learning in the context of education and pedagogical research. The article presents the theoretical foundations of the CBW method and its basis in the notions of being as emergent within the encounter, intra-action, entanglement of agencies, and the significance of matter. An outline of the scientific procedure is also presented.

Keywords: *Collective Biography Writing, qualitative research, educational research*

Introduction – on poststructuralist thought polyphony

Recently, there has been a revival of the ideas of post-structuralism. Poststructuralists are known for having drawn attention to the fact that schematic interpretation of texts results in the generation of fossilized, unilateral analytical models. This in turn conceals the entire meaning-creating space, particularly in terms of individual impressions and understanding. The key theses of poststructuralism became the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of intertextuality, which focused on the necessity of opening education to polyphony, to a multiplicity of voices and to an equal treatment of ideas. Bakhtin campaigned to introduce thought polyphony,

suggesting that it is “the prerequisite for opening to cultural polyphony” (Witkowski, 2007, p. 88).

Poststructuralist analyses do not concern wondering whether something is described correctly or incorrectly, i.e., whether it changes one apparent truth for another. The problems are not examined in dualistic categories consisting in distinguishing between good and evil, or in judging what is true or false. Instead, they concern acknowledging that it is possible to see other ways of constructing narratives by seeing the *subject-in-process* with the destabilization of stable, rational and unified notions. This is achieved through the examination of functions and the correctness of a given process (Wihlborg, 2015)¹.

Andrzej Szahaj (1993) critically analyses the poststructuralist approach and emphasizes that, although the existence of many possible interpretations cannot be discredited, the variation of possible interpretations faces many limitations. According to him, it is impossible for a poststructuralist researcher to interpret a private text because the language used is unique. Cultural communication requires engaging other members of a given community in the process of text interpretation, using their communicative skills to create a text which is intelligible for all the members of that community. A response to this type of criticism of poststructuralist assumptions can be found in collective biography writing.

Collective Biography Writing as a new/innovative method

The main sources of conceptual inspiration according to Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, authors of the most recent CBW methodology, comprised research reports about the strategy of memory-work created by German philosopher and sociologist Frigga Haug (1987), as well as the research of American philosopher Judith Butler (1997), French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1994) and American feminist studies theoretician Karen Barad (2007).

According to Davies and Gannon (2012, p. 358), “analysis of the paradoxical space of collective biography” should begin with these basic concepts:

- being as emergent within the encounter,
- intra-action or the entanglement of agencies
- significance of matter.

They will be discussed in turn.

¹ I thank Monne Wihlborg, PhD, from Lund University, for sharing many interesting materials on collective biography writing with me.

Theoretical Foundation of Collective Biography Writing

Being as emergent within the encounter

The basis for research conducted according to the CBW method is Barthes' concept of decomposition as well as Davies and Gannon's concept of mo(ve)ment. Based on this concept, "[we] will unravel - through focused collective work - the rational choosing subject of our individual biographies, necessitating a shift from the rational possibilities of deconstruction to the embodied subject decomposing itself" (Davies & Gannon 2006b, p. 172). This can be achieved through focused collective work:² "We focus on the specific remembered moments and on the movement that becomes visible in the particular mode of memory-writing" (Davies & Gannon 2006b, p. 172).

The subject in CBW is conceived as "emergent in each moment, moments that are simultaneously discursive, relational, and material. Each subject is one facet of a whole much greater than individual selves and much bigger than human lives alone" (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 358). Life constantly evolves. On the one hand, it simply flows; on the other, it drastically changes under the influence of its interactions. A subject becomes a subject only during an interaction. Everything happens in collective cooperation. In such circumstances, the (research) encounter does not assume the form of a meeting between individual subjects and discourse, but rather an intensive, joint project which deeply moves each member of the team and causes them to "relocate" to the memories of the "teller" or narrator.

Intra-action or the entanglement of agencies

The neologism "intra-action" created by Karen Barad is explained as "*signifying the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction," which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements*" (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

² Embodiment can be understood as a material representation of an idea, its visible form such as feeling or emotion.

Karen Barad introduces the concept of *intra-action* in order to clarify the idea of the individual. She understands it as the *subject-as-entity*, whose agency is a matter of individual will. In describing our necessary *interactions* with others, such as when people who work collectively on a CBW project meet, Barad refers the notion of intra-action to the movement generated in an encounter, in which two or more subjects (according to Barad – *bodies*) are in a process of becoming different.

According to Davies and Gannon, “this is an important conceptual innovation, bringing together distinct entities (subjects, concepts, landscapes, and so forth) and the fact that their distinctiveness *emerges* in an entanglement of agencies – their own and others” (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 361).

If we jointly work on memories during CBW, “we intra-act with each other’s memories of being and with the language in which they might be written” (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 361). We examine then the entanglements of matter and meaning through which we are co-implicated in the generation and evolution of knowing and being (Davies & Gannon, 2009). The aim of the work with memories is not to gain knowledge about oneself. During the physical, relational and discursive entanglement of an encounter we explore “this through which we are made and go on making ourselves human, not in isolation, but in intra-action, and not in generic sense, but in our particularities” (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 362).

Significance of matter

The main focus of Barad’s writing (2003) was to oppose the obstinate emphasis on the significance of discourse at the expense of matter (problem, case, issue) through proposing a poststructuralist understanding of meaning. The researcher states that the mutual relations are not to be found in pre-existing human entities, or in discourse, but can be understood through numerous, repetitive encounters, during which we can observe and feel the emergence of various entanglements. “Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder” (Barad, 2007, p. 3).

The outline of the research procedure in Collective Biography Writing

Davies and Gannon emphasize that during CBW workshops the main task “is not to find the truths of individual entities that pre-exist the collective work with memories”, but to experience the process of transformation resulting in liberation from boring schemes and repetitive and stereotypical explanations “that go to make a story of “me” and my life” (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 369). CBW is about

recapturing precise details from memory by remembering key images from our past, fleeting glimpses and scents. As highlighted by the researchers, the sensual meticulousness of the description leads to the result that, according to the domino effect, the members of a group will present the same feelings (cultural community of feeling patterns). CBW asserts that subjects “have language, and are constituted within the social in a multitude of contexts, including the contexts of the research” (Davies & Gannon 2006b, p. 3). It is assumed that “embodiment and sociality is a crucial dimension as life experience is remembered” (Davies & Gannon 2006b, p. 3).

CBW consists of several stages. A simplified methodological procedure follows³:

1. Selecting a group of respondents (usually students, teachers and academics) and choosing a leading topic (e.g. becoming someone, being recognized as someone or not being recognized as someone, subjectivity, intolerance, alienation, labour culture etc.);
2. Creating work schedule for the duration of the process (usually two semesters) together with homework, for which e-mails are the most convenient means of sharing opinions;
3. Initiating CBW through talking about memories connected with the chosen topic and choosing 1–3 stories for further (collective) work;
4. Writing down the memories with help from other participants in the workshop.

The story can be initially formulated through questions directed at its “teller”. The sentences are read consecutively. During the reading, the “teller” tries to imagine exactly the same feelings he had when the situation took place. He tries to evoke the same pictures and feelings, say the words which created those feelings, and relive that experience. The same feelings/emotions should be shared by the people who listen to his story. If this does not happen, it is necessary to stop and return to the essence of the meaning of particular words and (through enquiry) jointly choose those which cause the others to experience the “teller’s” feelings—in effect, “tuning” all team members in to the same experience. The aim of this process is to touch upon “the collective life” or “collective soul” and disclose how the main strain of research (e.g., our subjectivity) may be constituted in a social context (Wihlborg, 2015, p. 264).

Focusing on the details of the story leads to credible presentations of experiences (memories). Researchers ask profound questions, look further for nuances

³ The following articles were used in its formulations: Onyx & Small, 2001; Davies & Gannon, 2006a; Davies & Gannon, 2012; Wihlborg, 2015.

revealing parts of the text in which the description of the subject's experience is unclear or untrustworthy. At these moments it is helpful to suggest other words or tell one's own stories that are connected somehow with what the "teller" presents. It is also important to exemplify the story and illustrate it with the emotions it evokes and the impressions left on the senses (e.g., scents). This can be achieved by answering questions such as: *How did you feel, when this happened? What scents accompanied this? What impressions?* Focusing on one's own feelings and emotions ensures that the memories are somehow embodied and, as a result of this way of referring to one's own experiences, are easier to imagine and more intelligible to other group members.

Re-editing the story

After the activities described in point 4, the story, which had initially been written from memory, is edited once again, accounting for the details noticed by the CBW participants. As a result, the rewrite contains descriptions of emotions which have been elaborated on by the group and then linguistically refined according to the way the members personally experience the moment or event being described. In this phase, the memory of each CBW participant begins to register the joint experience and resonate affectively in the bodies of the listeners. The memory-story is, then, both intensely real and de-individualised. In such moments a real "agitation" of the body may occur such as trembling, nausea, physical fear, sadness or happiness.

Analytical memory read-outs

At this stage, it is visible how and to what extent we are always entangled in repetitive practices (particular ways of doing something, perceiving a given situation). Understanding this allows participants to grasp the strains of private and public discourse which show examples of ambivalence or ambiguity. We then have to do with "seeing, at the same time, the usual ways of seeing as ways of seeing, and seeing against the grain of those usual ways. The particular details of specific subjects are interesting only insofar as they can be used to make visible the ways in which bodies/emotions/desire/ memories become the inscribed (and re-inscribed) public/private, inner/outer depth/surface to be read against the grain of dominant/humanist discourses and practices" (Davies & Gannon, 2006a, p. 100).

Interpreting the results of work in categories

At this stage, CBW looks for answers to the most commonly asked questions, such as *what?*, *how?*, *where?* Depending on the topic, other questions may include: *What constituted the subjectivity? How? How does..... represent itself? What caused the decision? What caused this and not another course of the story?*

The focus should be on the deeper sense of the story, on the forces which created the given situation. Participants should ask what caused that exact situation to happen; what external (politics, economy, power, knowledge, situational context) or internal (e.g. personal characteristics) conditions influenced the course of the story.

Summary

CBW is an example of a new approach in narrative research which varies from traditional methods of biography research. Memories are treated as “data” which are generated in the course of joint work. The major advantage of CBW is the fact that this methodology allows participants to explore the unknown, elements that would remain veiled without more detailed analysis. The aim of analyses is not to expose hidden “truth” “but to disturb what is taken for granted and which is taken for a stable and unquestionable truth” (Wihlborg, 2015, p. 272). CBW allows participants to see that not everything is obvious. Prior to participating in such an analysis, it seems that all of our experiences are real and undisputed. As a result of CBW, we can see that perception of oneself, as well as one’s actions and emotions, are both entangled in and created by discourses. Our perceptions are entangled in the noose of circumstances and cultural conditions and their untangling is the essence of CBW.

Barad, Davies, Gannon, and Wihlborg show that human bodies are not “storage sites for memory”, but “mobile-affective site of writing” (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p. 374). The author of the text has no power over it and the story written by him is not an “anchor for truth”. The important moments of a participant’s biographic story should not be interpreted in isolated categories of specific elements of being, but as an emergent force within a web of agencies (material, affective, conceptual, and ideological) which interrupts the course of the event described in the biographic episode. As a result of going into “molecular” detail to discover the complicated conditioning and context in which the individual functions, we may begin to

answer questions about what we really know about ourselves and our reality. The methodology of collective work with memories starts by the deconstruction of the terms used in a narrative by the subject / “teller” but the aim is to reveal what “life” looks like, how the world works, what reality is like, and what happens in it; the aim is to understand. CBW methodology allows for critical analysis of the research process. For these reasons it may be viewed as significant for education and educational research.

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