

**Changing Identities and "Dual Professionalism"
in the Learning and Skills Sector**

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**“Almost a Therapy”: Taking Part in
a Life History Research Project**

Work in progress – please do not quote without consulting the authors

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Abstract

This paper explores boundaries between research and therapy in the field of adult education research. It considers the appeal of therapeutic ideas and language to adult educators and summarises the emerging critique of the 'therapeutic ethos'. It draws on empirical research from the 'Learning Lives' project to consider similarities and differences in the purposes, methods and outcomes of research and therapy. Using the data, the paper reflects on the nature of the learning that can be achieved through engaging in narrating life stories. It considers how such learning relates to the way people lead their lives and achieve agency. The paper concludes by considering the limitations of life history work as a force for change in education.

Introduction

For adult educators whose formation took place in the 1970s and 1980s there were several writers whose work were sources of inspiration: Paulo Freire's (1972) work asserted the fundamental importance to individuals and communities of being able to read and write critically while Ivan Illich (1973, 1975) was celebrated for his critique of institutions and the way they taught people to be dependent on them. However, surely no-one was more influential on the thinking and teaching practices of adult educators than the psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1951, 1961, 1983). His work was important for academics: he was a key influence, for example, on Malcolm Knowles' articulation of 'andragogy' (1990) and an inspiration for generations of teachers and teacher educators as well as for counsellors and therapists. One of the consequences of his influence, however, was that the boundaries between education and psychotherapy became blurred. Recently in Britain there has been a developing critique of the 'therapeutic ethos' within education (see Ecclestone 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Ecclestone et al. 2005) and an expression of scepticism about the consequences for learners and for teachers of an approach to education that uses ideas and language drawn from psychotherapy. The argument is made that, far from achieving the goals of empowering people and encouraging autonomy, the therapeutic turn diminishes individuals and provides the state with new opportunities for surveillance and control.

Within this debate, the Learning Lives project¹ holds a special responsibility. Critics of the 'therapeutic ethos' have called for empirical research (Ecclestone 2004a, 2004b, Ecclestone et al. 2005) to explore the evidence of the negative effects they see for individuals and groups. In this paper we take note of their concerns to review some of the data that has emerged from the project. One of our aims was to improve understanding of learning in the lives of adults and in particular how learning relates to notions of identity and agency. A key task was to highlight the significance of the broad range of learning processes and practices that occur in the lives of adults so as to show that there is more to learning than what is acknowledged in the economic definitions of lifelong learning (see Biesta 2004, 2006a, 2006b). The interviews were the key stratagem of a life history methodology (Alheit and Dausien 2002; Goodson 2001; Tedder and Biesta 2007; West et al. 2007) in which participants were given opportunities to talk about themselves, their lives and their learning, both retrospectively and

¹ *Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency* included a three year longitudinal study of the learning biographies of 150 adults of 25 and older during which participants were interviewed up to eight times between 2004 and 2007. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Award Reference RES139250111, and was part of the ESRC's *Teaching and Learning Research Programme*. *Learning Lives* was a collaborative project involving the University of Exeter (Gert Biesta, Flora Macleod, Michael Tedder, Paul Lambe), the University of Brighton (Ivor Goodson, Norma Adair), the University of Leeds (Phil Hodkinson, Heather Hodkinson, Geoff Ford, Ruth Hawthorne), and the University of Stirling (John Field, Heather Lynch). For further information see www.learninglives.org.

in relation to events that occurred in their lives throughout the duration of the project. All the interviews were transcribed and a copy of each transcript was sent to the participant concerned. In the final interview, participants were invited to reflect on the experience of taking part in the project - how they felt about taking part in the interviews and about receiving the transcripts - and this elicited a variety of responses within both cognitive and emotional domains.

Unsurprisingly, we found that some people were more adept at engaging in processes of telling stories about their lives than others and this suggested that the potential for their learning from such processes also varies. Drawing on literature on narrative in the human and social sciences (Polkinghorne 1988; Bruner 1990; Czarniawska 2004) and with the emerging body of work on narrative learning in adult education (Rossiter 1999; Rossiter and Clark 2007) we analysed the life stories of the participants. Our analysis revealed that in a significant number of cases, they had come to some kind of understanding about their lives and themselves and we found that this learning had had an impact on the ways in which they were able to achieve agency within their lives (Biesta and Tedder 2007). We became particularly interested in the role of life stories and life storying in such learning processes and in the relationship between the 'narrative quality' of such stories and their learning potential.

This paper therefore is structured as follows: we begin with a consideration of the therapeutic turn in education by looking at a definition of 'therapy' and considering the appeal to adult educators of humanist psychotherapists like Carl Rogers. We then summarise key points of the critique of the 'therapeutic ethos' as advanced through the work of Ecclestone (1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Ecclestone et al. 2005). There follows a section drawing on empirical data: firstly, there is a brief overview of comments made at the final interview about taking part in the project by the south-west based participants of the 'Learning Lives' project; and secondly there are two case studies that place learning within its biographical context. The cases are of two participants who had much to say in their final interviews about what they have learned from participating in the project and they were more open about their expressions of feelings than most. We consider how such participation relates to learning and whether participation in life history research could be considered as a therapy. We consider how such learning relates to the way people lead their lives and achieve agency. A brief discussion section follows considering where reflection on and learning from one's life end and where therapy begins. We ask in what ways life history work has a therapeutic function or 'effect'. Finally, we draw some tentative conclusions.

Education and Therapy

What is therapy? In discourses related to education, 'therapy' is usually an abbreviation for 'psychotherapy' and a quick search on wikipedia offers a general definition that:

Psychotherapy is an interpersonal, relational intervention used by trained psychotherapists to aid clients in problems of living. This usually includes increasing individual sense of well-being and reducing subjective discomforting experience. Psychotherapists employ a range of techniques based on experiential relationship building, dialogue, communication and behavior change and that are designed to improve the mental health of a client or patient, or to improve group relationships (such as in a family).²

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychotherapy>

The same source offers a distinction between therapy and counselling, that therapy is likely to be a response following diagnosis of a clinical condition whereas counselling is more likely to be a response to 'everyday problems'. However, the terms are frequently used interchangeably.

Acknowledging the importance Carl Rogers is the start of any discussion of the relationship between therapy, counselling and education. Some of his most influential ideas can be traced back to 1951 and the articulation of five 'basic hypotheses' that conceptualized 'student-centered teaching' as a process parallel to client-centered therapy' (Rogers, 1951). The first hypothesis was that: 'We cannot teach another person directly; we can only facilitate his (sic) learning'; and subsequent hypotheses asserted the importance of learning to the self – that an individual will learn only those things that are perceived as relevant to the self and only from engaging in processes that are perceived as unthreatening to the self (Rogers, 1951 quoted in Knowles, 1990, pp 41-42). Later, Rogers came to express great reservations about the value of 'teaching' and argued for the replacement of processes of 'teaching' with processes for the 'facilitation of learning'. His argument essentially was a curricular one, that there is an imperative for continual learning in a rapidly changing world:

Teaching and the imparting of knowledge make sense in an unchanging environment. This is why it has been an unquestioned function for centuries. But if there is one truth about modern man (sic), it is that he lives in an environment that is *continually changing*... We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the *facilitation of change and learning*. [Rogers, 1983, p120, italics in the original].

From his experience in psychotherapy, Rogers identified three 'ways of being' that he considered as especially important in a therapeutic relationship: the first was 'a realness or genuineness in the therapist'; the second was a 'nonpossessive, nonjudgmental caring'; and the third was 'the therapist's ability to listen in a very special empathetic way' (Rogers, 1983, p 34-35). These qualities are frequently referred to as the three 'core conditions' needed for a therapeutic relationship and summarised as congruence (or genuineness), unconditional positive regard and empathy. The implication for any aspiring teacher (or facilitator of learning) was that he or she needed to embrace 'realness' in order to take part in a 'struggle to discover our identity' (Rogers, 1983, p 33). There are also implications for the relationship established in life history research between a researcher and a project participant. This is important because research shows that the quality of the *relationship* between a therapist and the client has a greater influence on client outcomes than the specific type of psychotherapy used by the therapist. (Wikipedia quotes Hubble, Duncan and Miller 1999 and Wampold 2001 for discussion of the research). If teachers and researchers emulate therapists then the same is likely to hold true for them.

For adult educators there was enormous appeal in the assumptions of Rogerian thinking that human beings are capable of self-actualisation and have the potential to become aware, responsible people. But there are difficulties in the appeal of reconceptualising the teacher's role as a facilitator of 'student-centred learning': if there is no longer the traditional emphasis on the transmission of specific content as being central to a teacher's practice and if the ultimate responsibility for learning is the learner's, then how much remains of a teacher's purpose? A simplistic understanding of Rogers might suggest that the limits of a teacher's responsibility is to create 'conditions in which someone might learn' and that a teacher has no

further responsibility for learning; such a misreading might have powerful appeal to some teachers.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Rogerian notions of 'student-centred learning' offered a radical questioning of traditional pedagogy in the UK. Some time during the 1990s, however, it proved possible for the language of student-centred learning to be colonised by the new managers of further and adult education. The radical sheen that used to be associated with student-centred learning started to tarnish as students became learners and as 'providers' started to meet the needs of their 'customers' and 'clients' (Biesta 2004, 2006a).

The Problematic Rise of Therapy in Education

In 1999, when writing about lifelong learning, Kathryn Ecclestone expressed concern about conflicting policy goals that sought to achieve liberal, social justice and vocationally modernising objectives. There were contradictions framing post-compulsory education and she drew attention to the proliferation of guidelines, inspection, quality assurance and outcomes-led assessment that contributed to greater self-surveillance and peer-surveillance:

Yet, as the systems become more complicated, they require new experts and new bureaucracies to tell learners and teachers how to use them 'properly', creating mistrust of deviations from the formalised learning they produce. Mistrust, not just from governments who do not trust teachers, but also between education institution managers, inspectors, teachers and learners, become suffused with fear of taking risks or innovating new ideas or practices. (Ecclestone 1999, p. 342)

In seeking to understand this situation, Ecclestone drew on Furedi (1998) to note an ever-growing risk consciousness arising from a prevailing discourse of anxiety about the future. She suggested that a new 'moral authoritarianism' arose from such pessimism and that the resulting mindset led to low expectations of the potential for social progress, human agency and learners' motivation to take part in formal learning. She expressed concern that this moral authoritarianism was disguised by liberal intentions and warned that policy and practice in lifelong learning could turn into a form of colonisation over people's lives, one that will inevitably fail to achieve the goals of empowerment and transformation that have been watchwords of liberal educators:

Targets for higher level of formal achievement for more people conceal increasingly low expectations about the purposes of learning. Instead of transformation, social change and critical intelligence, education makes people cope and adjust while a vocational, credentialist curriculum encourages extrinsic motivation and self-interest. (*ibid* p 344)

At one point she commented on the effect of risk-consciousness and alluded to the providers of therapy; they would acquire greater importance in her later work:

This climate creates an insidious dependence on experts to 'help' people deal with their experiences 'appropriately', such as counsellors, advice workers and social services. (*ibid* p 337)

In 2004 Ecclestone published two complementary articles that continued some of the themes raised in this critique of lifelong learning but started significantly to articulate the problems

she saw arising from a 'therapeutic ethos'. The first article was a general reflection on the increasing use of therapeutic ideas and images in education while the second looked more specifically at the consequences for pedagogy in adult education. In the first piece Ecclestone began by noting the 'Rise of Low Self-Esteem'. She found that, despite the absence of conceptual clarity around major policy concerns such as social exclusion and inclusion, there was a policy language of people being 'at risk', 'vulnerable' or suffering from 'fragile learning identities', a policy language of disadvantage framed in personal and psychological terms. In particular Ecclestone commented on the policy focus on 'self-esteem' in discussions of cycles of deprivation and the consequences of 'low self-esteem' for community development. She argued that a 'complex reality' had been reduced by media language to issues of 'self-esteem' and that the acceptance of the term in popular culture and policy had become a folk-myth.

Within the educational field, Ecclestone recalled the radical and critical traditions of adult education and their ideological commitment to the transforming power of education and to the fundamental belief that people have an innate capacity and potential for agency, the idea that people can and should aspire to control their own life (Ecclestone 2004a, p 118). However, she noted the consequences for assessment practices of adopting a therapeutic approach and of assuming that people deemed to be marginalised or disaffected were unlikely to be able to cope without support. She argued such ways of thinking focus attention on individual failure rather than wider structural issues and shift attention away from inequalities outside and inside the system to focus on individual feelings about life circumstances.

Ecclestone's analysis of the reasons for this situation was the intensifying preoccupation with the self that occurred with particular strength in America during the 1980s and 1990s but also in Britain. She suggested that a consequence of the tendency to speak about behaviours in terms of 'emotional states, syndromes, addictions and dysfunctional categories' (*ibid* p 121) is to locate responsibility for them within psychological causes. The term 'therapeutic ethos' is defined as the language symbols and codes used in psychoanalysis or counselling that justify their extension into new areas of private and public life (*ibid* p 123).

Ecclestone refers to Furedi (2003) and his claim that an emotional form of individualism underpins a quest for understanding one's own identity, it is a quest for affirmation and recognition of that identity. However, identity adopts an individualised, emotional and introspective form and fails to become a foundation for politicised and social understanding. This amounts to 'a diminished view of the self that is increasingly likely to invoke our empathy and interest in others because their vulnerability and damage supposedly sheds light on our own' (*ibid* p 123).

In the associated paper Ecclestone explores curricular and pedagogical implications of her critique. She notes how a 'therapeutic ethos' uses a language of damage, fragility and dysfunction to characterise groups of learners and she sees this tendency as part of a prevailing pessimism about our ability to function effectively. We hold a negative view of life that makes us vulnerable and psychologically unwell. For teachers, such ways of thinking lead to revised ideas about professionalism and about students that reflect a 'diminished self'.

Ecclestone rejects claims from feminist and radical traditions that understanding how individual identities are constructed and limited by power structures could be a strategy for challenging prevailing power discourses. She is sceptical of the possibilities for an 'introspective pedagogy' to resist or subvert power:

While the nuances of personal identity and its construction are absorbing in some way as therapy is, it is not clear what material and social consequences these concerns have. This means that, although supporters of therapeutic pedagogy espouse a strongly radical rhetoric, their ideas are divorced from any substantial political analysis of the potential, or otherwise, for social change. (Ecclestone 2004b, p 126)

Social justice and liberal educational discourses about identity become infected with pessimistic images of vulnerability and human frailty, resonating with ideas about the 'diminished subject'.

The pedagogical result of the therapeutic approach is the creation of a ghetto of 'low-risk education' and, as certain groups of people are identified as on the margins or as dysfunctional, it becomes the role of professionals to articulate their needs and issues and to make appropriate provision for them. The consequence is that:

For some learners, then, education could become little more than a series of unchallenging experiences and interventions that probe their identity, diagnose their levels of self-esteem and explore emotional responses to life events. (*ibid* p 128)

The following year there appeared a further article written in collaboration with Dennis Hayes and Frank Furedi that explored the significance for education of emotional intelligence, self-esteem and self-awareness. The argument is made that a 'therapeutic ethos enables the State to legitimise cultural and political preoccupation with emotional well-being and to blur divisions between public and private domains' (Ecclestone et al., 2005, p 182) and warns that a concern for learning rooted in introspection, feelings of vulnerability and the avoidance of risk, undermines aspirations for education that develops meaningful knowledge and skills.

On this occasion, it is the rise of the 'diminished self' that triggers the discussion. Again there is concern that the State gives legitimacy to professionals adopting introspective and emotionally-led practices that would be regarded as intrusive were it not for the increasing general use of the language of feeling, emotions and deficiency.

The article includes a series of summarising propositions about the therapeutic turn in education and wider society. It is asserted that even well-established traditions in adult education – such as experiential learning, reflective practice, counselling-based pedagogy and life history research – are part of the problem because they seek 'legitimacy based, in part, on admitting personal dilemmas and uncertainties' (Ecclestone et al, 2005, p 193). There is opposition to 'therapeutic professionalism' because expectations of emotional closeness and notions of the diminished self erode professional distance and expertise; the nature of the relationship between teacher and students is changed when it is no longer one of mutual respect based on expertise and the demonstration of skills and achievement. The radical rhetoric of autonomy and empowerment is undermined by introspection and preoccupation with emotion and what is emerging are educational pathways that will give official recognition to work on personal identity and emotion.

This has serious political and social implications: instead of beliefs in people's capacity for agency and the chance to determine their own struggle for recognition, diminished subjectivity embroils them in an addictive quest for institutional forms of

recognition through formalised exploration of emotion and identity. (Ecclestone et al, 2005, p. 196)

More recently, the argument has been pursued further within a discourse of educational policy where a growing number of initiatives respond to diverse, often contradictory public, political and professional concerns about individuals' emotional needs. It is noted that the English education system has always been particularly susceptible to applying labels to students and that current practice involves extensive use of terms like 'vulnerable learners', 'at risk learners', learners with 'fragile identities' and 'low self-esteemers'. At times, whole groups of people, such as asylum-seekers learning English, working-class boys and young people deemed to be disaffected from formal education are seen as 'suffering from low self-esteem'. The article examines the rise of a political and professional orthodoxy around the theme of emotional well-being and engagement.

Government documents in the UK now routinely assert the importance of teachers accepting the need for intelligent handling of emotions and empathy with others and claim that such practices are inextricably linked to good citizenship, work success, inclusion and social cohesion (Ecclestone 2007, p 460). The Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2005) claims research evidence shows that emotional skills make people more effective in communities and workplaces, and that children with emotional problems are prone to mental illness, marital breakdown, offending and anti-social behaviour. Despite the popularity of such ways of thinking, Ecclestone suggests that emotional concepts in use are 'slippery' and are themselves 'fragile'; she references a review by psychologists (Matthews et al. 2002) of theoretical and empirical evidence for emotional intelligence and says they found no conclusive evidence for the construct and real difficulties in assessing it validly or reliably. Despite such frail foundations, there is increasing commitment to the promotion of personalised services in education and social services using the language of responding to individual needs and promoting emotional engagement, taking account of people's feelings about services. Within education there is a policy commitment to 'personalised learning' (DfES 2004; Pollard and James 2004).

Other critiques of psychotherapy have emerged from feminist, constructionist and discursive sources for whom the issue is power. They express concern that clients are persuaded to understand themselves and their difficulties in ways that are consistent with particular sets of therapeutic ideas which means that alternative ideas, such as feminist, economic, or spiritual, are sometimes implicitly undermined. From such perspectives, therapy is not simply a helping relation, it is also fundamentally a political practice, in that some cultural ideas and practices are supported while others are undermined or disqualified.

What should we make of such critiques? The analysis is appealing in offering educators insight to the dangers of ever-growing surveillance through the exploitation of personal vulnerabilities that we can all identify and frequently share. In some respects the argument is an elaboration of Illich's thesis that institutions inculcate dependency in their users, that schools teach the need to be taught and that hospitals (and therapists) make us unwell. Ecclestone and her colleagues offer us insight into contemporary processes of creating dependency. Moreover, the problem with the rise of a language of therapy in education is not only that it allows for new forms of surveillance, control and dependency. The language of therapy is also a thoroughly individualistic language and the danger is that through the language of therapy all relevant issues and problems concerning education and people's existence more generally become individualised, that is, they become seen as problems of

individuals for which we need individualised - if not personalised - solutions. The danger here is that it forgets that the problems as experienced by individuals may often have their cause in wider structural/societal issues. To prevent individuals from seeing the connection between their 'private troubles' and more wider 'public issues' can have a severely disempowering effect as well (see, e.g., Biesta 2006b; and also Biesta 2005; Biesta et al., 2008).

At the same time, the fear that our culture is under threat from a 'therapeutic ethos' is a reification of a nebulous idea and it is difficult to pin down the precise nature of the challenge when the adjective 'therapeutic' is used ubiquitously and usually pejoratively. In the course of Ecclestone's articles there are concerns about therapeutic ideas, therapeutic principles, therapeutic interventions and techniques; there is opposition to therapeutic professionalism and therapeutic legitimation because of their rooting in therapeutic subjectivity. But which of these are dangerous? It does not require extensive reading of journals to find that there is no single entity that could be construed as an orthodox therapy to afflict education: it is a deeply contested field. A cursory look at the magazine 'Therapy Today', for example, reveals that the November 2007 edition reported contested views of a medical model of therapy (Freeth, 2007) and an article in the February 2008 edition reflected on the current popularity, particularly among policy makers, of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (Veale, 2008). There are long-standing professional debates between different schools of counselling. While some have tried to make the case for an overarching paradigm for psychotherapy (Ellingham, 1997), the field continues to include many rival camps. Hans Eysenck rubbished them all by describing psychotherapy as 'a mish-mash of theories, a hugger-mugger of procedures, a gallimaufry of therapies, and a charivara of activities having no proper rationale' (Eysenck, 1970, quoted in Ellingham, 1997).

How, then, should the professional adult educator regard the way in which certain strands of therapeutic thinking have become entwined in adult education? What might be learned from research using methods that resemble therapeutic practices? We turn now to considering the experiences of adults who were participants in a series of interviews within the Learning Lives project. How did they feel about taking part in the project and what how does this relate to learning?

What they thought about taking part

At their final interview eighteen participants in the Learning Lives project in the south west were asked what it had been like taking part in the project. Most had been interviewed seven times but a few had been recruited mid-way through the project and had been interviewed three times. All were invited to comment on the experience of being asked every few months to give an account of their recent experiences and thoughts and to comment on what the transcripts of the previous interview meant to them. Six said they had 'enjoyed' the experience and others used positive language about taking part. There were many comments about the process being interesting or thought-provoking or giving food for thought. Perhaps less expected were the comments that admitted to certain aspects of the process engendering fear. Thus Bob Davidson, a man who had taken part in the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq, and was in the process of retiring from the Royal Navy when we interviewed him, feared he was going to appear boring:

The biggest danger is, for me, when I did this, when I found out it was going to be public, well it's not dangerous but, fear, let's, let's call it, was that my life was going

to be boring, that my life, me, me as a person, I'm a boring individual. (*Interview 3, April 2007*)

Diogenes summarised the process as being 'thought-provoking, interesting, um frightening at times' (*Interview 7, June 2007*) and clarified that it was recalling certain events in his life that was frightening. Marie Tuck also described taking part as 'interesting', as 'food for thought' and commented that, having recently effected a significant change in her life by separating from her husband, that 'it's bloody scary, really scary' but that 'I'm dead chuffed with myself to have done this.' While Diogenes spoke of events in the past that were frightening, Marie's fears were of the future.

An unusual response came from Lee Awen, our youngest male participant at 25 years of age, who found the interviews a strange process, particularly when he read the transcripts. He said such reading challenged him to think more critically about his beliefs and ideas. Rosie Phillips also found it an odd process though felt complimented that she should take part:

It's quite odd really, just talking about yourself and wondering if, is that relevant or am I just rambling on... it's complimentary isn't it, that my life is going to be, is regarded as worth, studying. (*Interview 3, July 2007*)

It was the opportunity for reflection that was appreciated by several of the participants; Graham Jeans is a former factory worker who has become a Skills for Life tutor working with the Family Learning Service of a local authority:

I think it pays to reflect on where you've been and what you've done, so how you reflect on it isn't necessarily, it could be just in your own mind, couldn't it, thinking about things as opposed to narrating them to someone else... I think I naturally reflect on what I'm doing and what I've done as it happens and then you forget it until the next incident that's similar. (*Interview 6, July 2007*)

Russell Jackson was another man who had spent many years in other careers before becoming a tutor of adults:

actually trying to work out what it is that you want to say in a coherent way when you're being faced with personal and um piercing questions um then that's a really useful, reflective tool that has been of great value to me. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Among our participants were some who expressed scepticism about the point of the process. Thus Maggie Holman, graphic artist and photographer, came to question the value of the interviews:

I initially I quite enjoyed an excuse to talk about myself, completely pointlessly, well obviously I hope it hasn't been pointless for you, um. [Pause] As it's gone on it's become slightly less of a novelty. [Laughs] I think sometime I'm [pause] probably wondering where it's going, hoping it's useful to you... I really, I really question the usefulness of it. (*Interview 7, January 2007*)

Maggie said that, were a similar opportunity to arise, she would not take it. Another participant, John Collings, saw the point of the interviews as only a chance to develop his communication skills and showed little capacity for life story telling. By contrast, two

participants specifically mentioned therapy in their comments. Jane Blair, manager of a Skills for Life centre, commented that she had enjoyed the interviews though had found it uncomfortable reading the transcripts:

So it's been, it's been quite useful and quite interesting, and I think a bit therapeutic really 'cos I'm, I'm not really very comfortable with talking about myself to any great extent. (*Interview 7, May 2007*)

John A Lee works for a utility company and commented that: 'I will miss this because it's, it's like um, it's almost like a, a like a therapy' (*Interview 7, May 2007*). Others appeared to share this idea even if they did not use the word; thus, Maria Macey, a woman in her fifties who had experienced periods of mental illness in her life, summarised her participation as follows:

I've loved it. I've found it very interesting and I've found it very helpful because I think a lot of your life, my life, I mean I think a lot of the stuff has been buried.... since I've been able to unravel it and go back, I can look at my life much more clearly and I think it's taken away a lot of guilt feeling. I had an awful lot of guilt about er the mental illness.

Bob Davidson, our retiring sailor, also hinted there was therapeutic value in his participation during an important transition in his life; he welcomed the opportunity to have a good listener and, for him, the effect of taking part was that:

It's allowed me to actually think about what to say, think about my past and also think about the present and the future, in a different way. (*Interview 3, April 2007*)

Two of our participants were particularly expansive in talking about their learning as a result of taking part in the project and, for them, we provide a fuller biographical context:

Life story 1: Anne Wakelin

Anne Wakelin was interviewed six times between November 2004 and May 2007. With her husband and three children, Anne has made a transition to live in a different part of the country from where she was born. When we first met, she was in her late 30s, had been married for 16 years and was the mother of a teenage daughter who was attending secondary school, a son who was a pupil at primary school, and a toddler who went to playgroup. The family came originally from Staffordshire where Anne had lived all her life until she and her husband decided to move to a village in the south west. She came from a close-knit family where she was accustomed to visiting parents, grandparents and sisters regularly. Her husband had been made redundant from his job and so, despite close family ties and an established pattern of life - and in the face of considerable scepticism from friends and family that they would go ahead with their move - Anne and her husband took the risks involved in making a major change to their lives. They had no previous connection with the village they moved to and yet were willing to leave behind their familiar lives for the sake of living somewhere new that was close to the sea.

Anne commented on the adjustments she had to make and what she learned from them. Some adjustments were material, how to cope with everyday matters like transport and shopping in a rural area and how she had learned to cope with the physical environment in which the

family lived. Other adjustments were more essential and involved the way she related to her husband and children as she started to develop a new sense of identity in her new home in a new community.

Through her son's primary school, Anne came into contact with a government initiative, Sure Start. She became a volunteer mentor and was invited to become 'parent rep' for the village at Sure Start organisational meetings. She became active in a number of community groups. In time she was employed by Sure Start as a community development officer with responsibility for leading several projects for parents and children. The number of hours she worked each week increased steadily during the time of the project. She described what she learned from the workplace:

I've learnt how, how hard it can be to get people - to try and get everything happening together um and knowing how much work goes into just even doing this backpack, of like going through the research and finding things, um looking through different areas in which to find things... all the different areas in which you can go. (*Interview 4, May 2006*)

When she left school, Anne had trained as a hairdresser, working for several years in established businesses before branching out and running her own salon. She saw her developing community involvement in terms of fulfilling the aptitude she showed in hairdressing which she described as being a 'people person'. In the face of the new challenges of being in a new place and in a new job, Anne maintained an enthusiastic approach to life: her interview transcripts are full of comments about what she loved doing and expressions that things were 'fab', 'fantastic', 'lovely', 'brilliant'. Never did she express any sadness or regret about the move from Staffordshire.

Alongside her workplace learning were elements of formal learning. Anne had started an NVQ 3 in Early Years and Education; however, while she found it 'second nature' to help at the school and get her practical experience, she had found it difficult to put aside time to do the necessary paperwork. She also found it difficult to keep up her attendance at a community-based centre where she enrolled to improve her ICT skills.

There was a physical manifestation of the changes that Anne had experienced by our fifth interview. Anne had started attending a slimming club and lost three stone in weight. She resembled far more the glamorous young hairdresser who features in photographs in the family home. She spoke of having regained interest in buying new clothes and caring once more about her appearance. Another change was in the way Anne reported the chronology of her story: in our early interviews, Anne's sense of time was mainly 'family-centric' – she recalled chronology in terms of when things had happened to family members. By the final interviews she was 'organisation-centric' and using standard chronology.

Anne's employment prospects were limited because Sure Start was due to end. At one interview she described the uncertainties facing everyone in the organisation as its demise drew near and the future of the projects which they had supported was shrouded in uncertainty. Nevertheless, she had no regrets about the changes in her life that followed her move and considerable satisfaction about future prospects:

Oh I love it. I love where I am. I love where I live. I love where I am. Everything's fine. I wouldn't change anything at all. [Laughs] (*Interview 5, November 2006*)

In the event, Anne found employment with the local authority and was able to continue in her role as a community development officer.

Anne's narrative learning

Elsewhere we have written about narrative learning (Biesta et al. 2008) and of the way a life can be a 'site for learning' either through the narration of life events or through reflection on a narrative. Here we consider the extent to which Anne's participation in the project showed what she had learned from her life and consider to what extent the processes involved might be considered therapeutic. We also consider what effect such learning has on the way she leads her life, what it indicates about agency.

The sixth and final interview took place in June 2007 and proved to be rather different in content and style from earlier interviews. In the early interviews Anne provided a descriptive account of what was going on for her and for other family members. She constructed a vigorous story around events and meetings during which she emerged strongly as an enthusiast, engaging energetically in family life. Her approach broadly was to provide a chronological response to invitations to tell her life stories and she would develop dialogue-driven vignettes around family members, particularly her children, and around her work experiences. In the course of the project she was experiencing an important transition in her life in that she was returning to a full-time working life though not as the hairdresser she had trained to be but as a community development officer. What she had learned about herself was expressed in a simple maxim that she was 'a people person'.

We asked Anne about her participation in the project and she commented on what a rare opportunity it had been:

I've really enjoyed doing it. I've enjoyed doing it because it's, it's not very often that somebody sits there and lets you tell them about what you are and what you do and how you do your [pause] how your life has been, has been really. (*Interview 6, June 2007*)

It was suggested that perhaps the experience was like talking with friends or with relatives. While she agreed that friends may well get together and reminisce, it was never to the extent that someone talks about themselves at length. She added that family members have so many interests and commitments that they would not listen for long either.

Although Anne had not been a particularly reflective story teller in the earlier interviews, in the final one she was able to comment on how she had changed during the time we met. She commented on things she knew, on things she could do, on her changing outlook and on her increasing confidence:

I'm doing more for a starter. I'm completely different in what I do. I'm working now. More confident in myself as I was three years ago, and more knowledgeable in what I do as well. The different outlook on things, you know, in my work, because I'd only ever been, as I say I'd only ever been a hairdresser. (*Interview 6, June 2007*)

The changes had come about "not just because of doing this, but how my life has changed so much since, in the last three years." The interviews enabled her to articulate the changes that had occurred and the learning she had experienced.

However, questions in the final interview about taking part in the project took us to a deeper level. Anne communicated some of her underlying anxieties about getting older and the personal costs that were involved in pursuing her job. She was saddened that she was starting to move beyond motherhood, found it 'horrible' to realise that she would no longer have a baby in the house. It was evident she felt torn between her situation as a mother and as someone who enjoys being at work and sees it as necessary to fulfil herself as a 'people person':

I would have been a right miserable bugger or, you know, I don't know how I'd have been. So life takes you in such funny ways you never know what's there. You never know how it's going to turn out, so just go with it... I mean [my son] does say to me, he says "I hate your job, I hate your work," and I say, "Why" "Cos you're not here for me."

The final interview became more reflective about relationships and life experiences and thus came closer to what might be expected in counselling. The interview had not attempted to address any particular problems or issues that Anne experienced, although she had reported some of the complications of her life, notably in her relationship with her teenage daughter. It was, perhaps, hardly surprising that, after several interviews, a relationship had been established in which the interviewer had shown empathy, congruence and positive regard and Anne felt able to address more emotional issues.

With respect to the transcripts Anne was among the few project participants who welcomed them: she expressed pleasure in getting a written record of the interviews and excitement in reading them. She did not let her husband or anyone else see them but it was apparent that in time she would share them with other family members. She found the transcripts to be an authentic representation of her life at the time: "in years to come ... I can show my kids this is what my life was about at this age." (*Interview 6, June 2007*)

What did we learn about the achievement of agency in Anne's case and how has her learning contributed to the way she leads her life? There are several respects in which Anne's life could be circumscribed and scripted: she has working class origins in the West Midlands, she is female and a mother, she has values, beliefs and goals in life that reflect her cultural framing. She and her husband shared a dream of moving to another part of the country and achieved that change. More recently, Anne has effected an opportunistic change in her occupation as hairdresser by becoming a community development officer. She is driven on by her energy and enthusiasm to engage with the opportunities life presents and she learns from such opportunities; at the same time she is cognizant of the personal cost that she is no longer available for her children and husband in the way she once was.

Life Story 2: Russell Jackson

Seven interviews with Russell Jackson took place between November 2004 and December 2006. Russell was born in 1951, the sixth of seven children in a working-class family living in a small town in the south west of England. He passed the eleven plus examination and went to the local grammar school but his experience there was not a happy one and Russell described himself as a victim of bullying. When he was asked to leave the grammar school at the age of 16, Russell applied for an apprenticeship at a local engineering company where he

immediately felt more at home. He served his time as an apprentice and achieved a full technological certificate from the local college after five years in 1972.

Russell worked as an engineer for the same company for a further six years during which time he married and became father of two children. However, he could see few prospects for career advancement in his home town and applied for a job in Scotland where he stayed for two years. He then moved to the Midlands where he worked for a succession of engineering companies, including a Finnish-owned company which required Russell to undertake regular international travel as part of his job. His career trajectory was one of steadily increasing his managerial responsibilities.

In the mid-1980s came an event that would lead to a major disruption in Russell's life, what he described in the interviews as a conversion experience. Vividly, Russell recalled the very moment when he felt called to become a Christian. Not only was there a religious conversion but Russell also developed a vocation to become a priest in the Church of England. He undertook with enthusiasm a two year full-time course of study at a theological college. After ordination Russell was appointed to a curacy back in the south west of England and this was followed by a decade of working as a priest, not only in parishes but also in a diocesan role that involved training others to support children and young people.

In retrospect, Russell judged that he overworked and that his relationship with his wife suffered as a consequence. There was a relationship with another woman that led to a scandal and to Russell's resignation as a priest. He spoke frankly in the first interview of recognising his failure:

That is one of the hardest lessons I have ever learned about my own frailty and fallibility, really. I've sat the other side of the table on many occasions helping people who have found themselves in difficult situations To find myself the other side of that coin, with failure and disgrace and everything around, extraordinarily difficult but it was a job I did really well. I just know that about myself and many other people have told me that. (*Interview 1, Nov 2004*)

A further career transition occurred, in that Russell still needed to earn a living but had to adjust to the loss of the role that was central to his sense of self, his vocation to the ministry. He needed also to adjust to changed domestic circumstances when he married his second wife and gained two step children. Acting on the suggestion of a friend, he applied for and secured a fixed term contract with the adult education service to teach computing skills. His expertise in this field had been acquired during his working life in engineering.

By the fifth interview at the end of 2005 there had been a significant shift in Russell's thinking about teaching. He had believed that, in time, he might be able to resume his job as a parish priest but the prospects for such a return receded and Russell described himself as 'becoming ambitious within the context I find myself in'. By the final interview, Russell had been appointed as an Assistant Principal in adult education and he was excited by the potential for becoming involved in more strategic decision-making. Russell had formally retired from the Church of England but there continued to be a sense that he had come closest to being what he 'was intended to be' in the days when he was a priest and was working on youth matters for the diocese:

I still find it really hard to talk about um the things that I did as a parish priest and as a children's adviser.... we ran courses for clergy and young people on child protection issues, I did a lot of good in that role. ... I learned lots of things ... so you see, it's really close to my heart.... It's been the role um that I felt most truly mine, to what makes me most truly the person that I was intended to be. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Russell's narrative learning

Russell was a project participant who, more than any other, talked of the way reflection through narrative was important to his learning and his life. Russell's narration functions as a site of learning, a site where he learns about himself and the world. Here we consider some of the ways in which Russell's participation in the project showed what he had learned from his life and consider to what extent the processes involved might be considered therapeutic. We also consider what effect such learning has on the way Russell leads his life and what that suggests about agency.

Like Anne, Russell experienced change, at times effected by him, at times responsive to external circumstances; however, talking about his life during the interviews was undertaken in a very different style. He was not someone who used dialogues or conversations to tell stories but was more discursive and occasionally used indirect speech. His stories were chronologically structured but recurring themes emerged: such as his valuing of creativity and his exploration of what it means 'to be human'. He was analytical of his life experiences using lists and categories; he was evaluative in making moral judgements about his actions; he was reflective on the significance and meaning of his stories. Telling stories provided a technique within which to explore significance or to reach judgement and it became apparent that reflection was a central part of Russell's life, and reflective stories were a key part of Russell's way of being.

Taking part in the narration of life stories in the interviews helped Russell to 'objectify' his life and make it into an object of reflection. His reflections included the quality of his emotional character and the significance of feelings in his life. The very process of narration was used for reflection and enabled him to achieve certain insights he had not had before:

I am an emotional person. I believe things passionately. I think that is one of the things that makes me – gives me [pause] the commitment and the courage to tackle some of the things that I find hard. ... um things do affect me, very deeply, very profoundly and um those long pauses [in the interviews] are partially to try and work out myself what I, how I can express what I feel and partially to, for me to um keep control of um myself. (*Interview 4, September 2005*)

With the transcripts, the written record of his storying, Russell found reading his own interviews a 'hugely moving' experience. Like others, he found the transcripts difficult to read because they were verbatim records of the interviews but, like Anne, he worked through the challenge to affirm the authenticity of the record:

I read through the last transcript, lots of "ums" there and... I guess it's more truthful that what I am [laughs] ...and actually one of the things that I think is important about the transcript ... is the truthfulness of it. And if I'm arguing that life is messy and untidy and so on then the transcript really ought to reflect that, not be nice and tidy and readable, because it's not readable. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

During the final interview, the therapeutic potential of such meetings was evident when Russell reflected on his relationship with his first wife, using the analytical tool of narrative learning. He commented that, after many years of marriage, he knew little about her:

I just think that some people are natural story-tellers and some people um enjoy telling a story... I didn't know her story because she never told me her story, in that sense. I never knew her interpretation of the story that we shared, you know, um and I can't imagine her telling a story – she's a very intelligent woman and very caring, lots of really high qualities. I don't mean to be detracting in any way except that she never told her story and she never told her story to the person who is supposedly closest to her. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

As was the situation in the final interview with Anne, after several interviews conditions had been established of a relationship with the interviewer characterised by empathy, congruence and positive regard. In the context of talking about learning in his life, Russell felt able to talk of his relationship and its significance as part of his story.

What we can learn about agency in Russell's case and how has his learning contributed to the achievement of greater agency in life? There are ways in which Russell's life is circumscribed and potentially scripted: he has working class origins and his account of passing his eleven plus examination is not untypical of the well-established 'working class grammar school boy' story. He steadily deviates from that script as he pursues his vocation, initially for engineering and then as a priest. Nonetheless, his account of early experiences suggest they contributed vitally to his developing moral sense – the steadfast resistance to bullying, compassion for others, his commitment to social justice. That moral sense gives Russell a particular frame for evaluating actions and relationships. It is interesting to consider the connection between that moral sense and Russell's vocation to be a priest. Was his vocation essentially an aspiration to moral agency? And is this a continuing characteristic of his aspirations to 'make a difference' in his current field of adult education?

We have suggested elsewhere (Tedder and Biesta 2007) that central to the 'plot' of Russell's narrative was his identity as a priest, the 'discovery' of the person he was intended to be. That discovery was clearly something that he learned from his life – through a complex process of experience, reflection, communication and interaction – and it is something that not only had significant impact on his life as an 'event'; it also had a significant impact on the perception of his life, his life narrative, and hence on the way in which he was able to make sense of his life and of himself. In the narration of these events through the interviews and in reflecting on a written narrative we secured evidence of the way experiences in Russell's life had an impact on his agency, on the ways in which he has made decisions about his life and the ways in which he has responded to particular life events. As he observed in the final interview:

(T)he one thing I've got is the power of narrative. I'm not well qualified. I'm not, you know, hugely intelligent or all those really worthwhile things, I've just got a story. And the story informs who I am and the story makes me who I am and out of that I have an ability and a confidence and the ability to deal with people in their stories. (*Interview 7, December 2006*)

Discussion

If we give attention to the boundary between research and therapy, we can say that the starting point for therapy is the existence of a problem and that the purpose of a therapeutic intervention is to try and solve the problem. This is already an important difference between what we have been doing through the research and a therapeutic relationship, because our starting point was not that our participants would have problems that we were there to solve. This is also the case if a comparison is made with counselling, because counselling, although dealing with less 'severe' or less 'objective' or 'diagnosable' problems, is also focused on solving problems. This is not to suggest, of course, that the interviews and the narration of one's life was not beneficial for our participants and perhaps they may have helped them to solve or address some 'problems'. But our interest in agency means that we were not really concerned with the possibility that narration might be a problem solving strategy, particularly not for mental health problems or life problems; our focus is on how learning from one's life may have an impact on how the life is led (and this is a broad spectrum). We would hesitate to call this a 'therapeutic effect' of the interviews, because that suggests too much a focus on a particular kind of problem.

What we have found in our research is that many people engage in much useful reflection and narration in order to lead their lives and that they resolve issues and problems through such processes - issues that may be about self in relation to others, or issues about life, or issues about meaning. We have found that the narration of life, by which we mean the storying and the emplotment of life, is an important vehicle for this. To a certain extent these processes happen spontaneously. The responses of Ann Wakelin in her final interview gave us cause to wonder whether there has been such erosion of traditional opportunities for the narration of life with friends and family that there is a need for others to become involved. However, it remains open to question how far the intervention of professionals is desirable, whether as therapists, counsellors or other providers of information, advice and guidance.

At the same time we need to be conscious of our 'confessional culture' and the propensity for people to engage in therapeutic practices. There is media interest in 'celebrities' from sport and popular culture who are willing to talk in public about their emotional selves and there is media exposure for politicians prepared to reveal their 'human' side by talking about their failures and limitations. It is possible that some of the Learning Lives participants expected an interview about narrating their life story would fulfil a comparable role. We are inclined to say that the 'genre' of storying one's life is a modern phenomenon, probably Western, and may be class related. Our evidence does not suggest any particular gendered differences in willingness to take part in such disclosure.

However, there is a critical matter around the political implications of the confessional culture, particularly in education, and this is where serious attention needs to be accorded the critics of the therapeutic ethos which places 'the self' at the centre of policy and practice in education. The danger is that preoccupation with emotion and subjectivity leads to a policy context in which psychological and therapeutic notions are favoured in analyses of educational and social programmes at the expense of social and political analyses. It is well researched (see, for example, in the context of access studies Reay 2003, Reay et al. 2002, Tedder 2007) that even where adult students have well-developed relationships with tutors and with other students, an inability to succeed becomes perceived as an individual and personal failing while economic, social or geographic factors are scarcely countenanced. If 'the self' is conceptualised and labelled as disadvantaged or dysfunctional then this leads to a negative and pessimistic view of the possibilities of human agency. Perhaps as a consequence

of our particular methodology we have picked up very little about how private troubles can be translated into public issues.

Conclusions

There is a challenge around therapy and its relationship with education that is brought into prominence by our research experience in the Learning Lives project. Our conclusion is that taking part in life history research interviews is not therapy as such because the purposes of research and therapy are distinct. A life history project does not intrinsically have a diagnostic or clinical dimension for individual participants and whatever benefits accrue from a project will accrue primarily for the researcher and the project team. Any benefits for the respondents are incidental. Our ambition in the Learning Lives project was not to solve people's problems, or even to define those problems as individual problems; what we have been able to show is the huge capacity for structured meaning making that people have in their lives. Some people are able to put this capacity to effective use in their lives; others are not able to do this but that does not mean they have a problem and it does not mean that they are incapable of learning. What our research found was spontaneous meaning making through narration, and found that this process is definitely helpful for some people, particularly if, through processes of creating stories and plots, they are able to achieve insights and understandings that they can use in their lives.

The challenge arises when the implications of such findings are placed in a wider policy context. Those who engage in biographical research share with professionals involved in counselling and therapy encounters with people who, in many instances, are leading difficult and even horrendous lives. Those who sound the alarm about the therapeutic ethos recognise the authenticity of such conditions and yet warn of the risks of constructing deficiency and constraining agency as a consequence of using therapeutic language to describe such conditions. If professionals define themselves and the people they work with as 'being at risk', 'emotionally frail' or unable to deal with external and self-induced problems, then the risk is that a sense of individual and collective helplessness can take hold. Teachers who use language and symbols drawn from particular traditions of therapy should be aware that such thinking may be inconsistent with their progressive aspirations for promoting individual autonomy or for creating community. However the problem is one of the superficial use of the language and symbols of therapy and lack of rigour in observing the practices. We should treat critical warnings seriously but should not abandon the progress that has been made in creating spaces for people to consider and reflect on their lives. At the same time, it is beholden on life history researchers to remember that, if we don't provide opportunities to 'translate' private reflections into more collective learning processes, then we may indeed run the danger that simply facilitating reflection through life history and other methods will not lead to any significant change.

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