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## **Personal Narratives and Policy: Never the Twain?**

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In this paper the extent to which stories and personal narratives can and should be used to inform education policy is examined. A range of studies describable as story or personal narrative is investigated. They include life-studies, life-writing, life history, narrative analysis, and the representation of lives. We use 'auto/biography' as a convenient way of grouping this range under one term. It points to the many and varied ways that accounts of self interrelate and intertwine with accounts of others. That is, auto/biography illuminates the social context of individual lives. At the same time it allows room for unique, personal stories to be told. We do not explicitly discuss all the different forms of auto/biography. Rather, we investigate the epistemology underlying personal story in the context of social action. We discuss the circumstances in which a story may validly be used by educational policy makers and give some examples of how they have done so in the past.

### **CONTEXT**

In this section the range and variation of research which is included under the designation 'narrative research' is considered along with reasons for adopting the alternative title of 'auto/biography'.<sup>1</sup> The current enthusiasm for 'narrative research' more generally in education is outlined. Finally, and briefly, the purposes of educational research are examined along with implications for the usefulness of auto/biography arising from different views about what research is for.

Narrative research is generally contrasted with positivist accounts of research and seen as part of the move away from the search for a generalisable objectivity to a valuing of, and interest in, individual experience and personal stories (e.g. Casey, 1995/6; Fraser, 2004). As Kvernbekk (2003) notes, the concept of narrative is 'crucially vague'. If humans are conceptualised as 'storytelling organisms' who lead 'storied lives', any attempt to understand their experiences - as individuals or in social groups - may be seen as an enquiry into their stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). As a consequence it would appear that, for some, almost any qualitative research could reasonably come under the heading of narrative. However others have sought to be more prescriptive in defining narrative: for Polkinghorne (1995) narrative is a storied text in which events are brought together into a unifying sequence in which there is a plot, and for most this notion of causal sequence is a necessary element of a narrative (Kvernbekk, 2003). For Polkinghorne a narrative analysis need not be based on data which take narrative form; rather the narrational element is to be found in the story which the researcher constructs or re-constructs to make sense of data in any form. Here the narrative is the product of the analysis and not the starting point. Smeyers and Verhesschen (2001) draw on the work of Polkinghorne (1995) and Bruner (1986) in distinguishing between the analysis of narrative, in which the narratives are the data and the aim is to identify *common* themes and their interrelation, and narrative analysis in which the aim is to understand the *particular* instance.

We have chosen to use the phrase 'auto/biography' to describe the approaches to research which we examine. This marks our focus, which is specifically on personal,

individual stories, within the broad category of 'narrative research'. 'Auto/biography' may be used to cover life-stories and life history (e.g. Atkinson, 1998; McNulty, 2003; Chaitin, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Arad and Leichtentritt, 2005; Sanders and Munford, 2005; Stroobants, 2005) life-writing and personal histories, (e.g. Bullough, 1998; Couser, 2002; Eick, 2002), narrative analysis (e.g. Reissman, 1993; Franzosi 1998) and the representation of lives (e.g. Richardson, 1992; Santoro, Kamler and Reid, 2001). In practice it would seem that some writers use these terms interchangeably, whereas for others a key aim of the project is to distinguish between terms (e.g. Jolly, 2001; Smith and Watson, 2001). Drawing such distinctions is not a purpose of this paper. Rather, in using the term auto/biography, we distinguish our focus on personal and individual accounts from those accounts such as vignettes and fictionalised stories which are intended to present a generalised picture of qualitative data: these are forms of 'boiled down' qualitative data which no longer embody the particular (e.g. Clough, 1996, 2002).

The 'narrative turn' in the social sciences is usually fixed at around the early 1980s (Casey, 1995/6; Czarniawska, 2004), following a similar narrative turn in literary studies in the 1960s. The interest in narrative research has touched all of the social sciences - even in the apparently unlikely case of economics (McCloskey, 1990). It has particularly taken root in the areas of health (or, more accurately, illness) studies (Jordens and Little, 2004; Wetle, Shield, Teno, Miller and Welch, 2005), social work (Fraser, 2004; Glasby and Lester, 2005), and education (Pollard, 2005; Lawson, Parker and Sikes, 2006). It can be argued that the fundamental tenet of good practice in these disciplines is an assumption that development (learning, healing, personal growth) can only take place in the context of a relationship between practitioner and client, and so these 'helping' services are often delivered in the context of a personal relationship. Hence biography is already an accepted and valued aspect of work in these fields (Froggett and Chamberlayne, 2004). An alternative explanation for the popularity of narrative approaches in these practitioner areas is that they are disciplines dominated by women both in practice and in research, and there are close links between feminist research (along with other movements for social change) and auto/biography (Stanley, 1993; Casey, 1995/6; Mauthner, 2000; Townsend and Weiner, in preparation).

As Oancea and Pring (this volume) make clear, we are living in the 'what works?' age of educational research in which the constant search is for interventions whose effectiveness has been scientifically 'proven'. The rise in interest in narrative research has been described as a 'clear reaction' to this breakdown of teaching into 'discrete variables and indicators of effectiveness' (Doyle, 1997, p. 94). This focus on 'objective' research has fed a tendency to disregard the expertise of teachers in favour of the search for the elusive 'one size fits all' solution to effective teaching. An important element of auto/biography is that it focuses on the intersection between individual experience and the social context (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995; Stroobants, 2005). As Fraser observes, what she calls 'narrative approaches' have '...the capacity to attend to context as well as idiosyncrasy...' (2004, p. 181). Likewise, Froggett and Chamberlayne argue that (2004, p. 62) 'Biographical methods can help restore the relationship between policy and lived experience by moving between the micro-and macro- levels'. In a similar vein, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) call for more research using alternative methods such as narrative and autobiography. They argue

that it is only through these methods that our understanding of the complexities of human behaviour in the social context can be developed.

The main question addressed in this paper is whether auto/biography can and should inform policy. This raises the prior issue of the purpose of educational research and how this links to the purposes of policy makers. As Ozga (2004) notes, policy makers and researchers have different agendas, a point echoed by Hammersley (2002). These agendas may conveniently overlap at times in the pursuit of knowledge that has a practical use, but educational research is not limited to this purpose. Hammersley (2002) advocates a 'moderate enlightenment' view of educational research which seeks to provide understanding rather than solutions and which makes claims which are tentative. Similarly Munn (2005) distinguishes 'blue skies' research which produces knowledge which filters into the received wisdom and so indirectly influences policy, from 'applied research' which seeks to address the 'what works and why?' question. Further, Munn (2005) argues for the particular importance of the 'why' part of this question since it allows researchers to explore specific contexts and examine the complexities of policy implementation.

In Hammersley's view, what educational research can provide is limited; in particular, he notes the well-known difficulties in deriving 'ought' from 'is'. The is/ought or fact/value distinction was first raised as problematic by Hume and has been widely discussed since. Dennett (1995) disputes Hume's argument in general. Earlier, Searle (1964) had argued that the distinction disappears in the case of some social facts such as promises. It may be argued, similarly, that in any case where there is agreement on normative judgements an argument can be made for empirical research having a role in showing that 'in order for x to happen you ought to do y'. (Or in showing that 'y has no influence on x happening so you ought not to do it.')

As Biesta (2007) argues, the 'what works' tradition makes the mistake of assuming the move from 'is' to 'ought' because it ignores the importance of normative practitioner judgements - which are not necessarily in agreement with those of the researcher or the policy maker. The role for the empirical researcher moves to: 'If you want x to happen, y is one strategy you should consider.' (Or, '...y is a strategy that is not worth considering.'). Biesta advocates a wider role for educational research which he terms 'cultural' and which is concerned with making problems visible and seeing things differently, and which, he argues, is rightly concerned with questions of ends as well as means. Indeed some traditions of research would see challenging orthodoxies as a fundamental purpose - rather than research being the route to getting politics out, it is seen by some as the way to get politics in (Gitlin and Russell, 1994). In a similar vein Ozga and Jones (2006) suggest that in the context of global 'travelling policy' there is a need to take account of research which addresses the normative question of what new education systems ought to look like in different contexts, taking into account issues such as poverty, life changes, and access to opportunities. Hogan (2000) deplores the vacancy in educational policy making which arises if it is not informed by a rich, qualitative understanding of education itself.

Research, then, can be seen as generating understanding which may influence policy indirectly. Alternatively it can be seen as exploring the potential of solutions to problems. Moreover, it can explore reasons for why those particular solutions work and in what contexts. It has a role to play in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about education, and in addressing the question of the proper

understanding of education itself. Auto/biography has a different contribution to make to each of these research goals, and each goal will articulate differently with policy at different levels and at the different stages of formation, implementation and evaluation.

### QUESTIONS OF CONFIDENCE

Having outlined a contextual description covering the nature of auto/biography and educational research as understood in this paper, we now move to more precise questions about the evidential weight that can be placed on particular auto/biographies and whether policy makers can have confidence in them.

Personal stories are sometimes dismissed as anecdotal. They are also criticised for distorting the wider picture by overemphasising one, perhaps unrepresentative, case. Anecdotes are short biographical or autobiographical accounts of incidents, told because they are thought to be interesting, amusing or in order to make a debating point. They take the form of crafted stories, sometimes, like the urban myth, passed on orally, purporting to be from the life of 'a friend of a friend'. While anecdotal evidence counts for little in research terms, it is, nevertheless, powerful in rhetorical terms. Such stories are known to have the power to affect the audience. No doubt this is why anecdotes are used in political presentations, such as party political broadcasts or policy pamphlets. 'Human interest' is said to hook readers of newspapers into reading an article. Indeed, anecdotes can affect policy. Anecdotes told to powerful people may change their minds about issues, where other sources of information and argument have not. In research terms, an anecdote (as in 'anecdotal evidence') may also be a personal story told and heard without critical attention being paid to questions of context or reflexivity.

We argue that although anecdotal evidence *can* be influential in policy terms it *should* not be. It is especially important to be able to distinguish auto/biographical research from anecdote since one looks superficially like the other and both can be powerful, at least in individual cases. One concern of this chapter is to explain and justify the distinction. This kind of concern is not peculiar to auto/biographical research. Similarly, researchers need to be able to distinguish eye-witness accounts taken at face value from well-designed observational research evidence. Indeed this kind of distinction is not peculiar to qualitative research. Quantitative research, too, needs to guard against putting too much weight on salient instances, for instance by over-generalising from one school, one year or one intervention.

If, as we are suggesting, auto/biographical research is more than anecdote, then the issue that becomes fundamental concerns how sound it is. We have chosen to use the term 'sound' because in logic it distinguishes truth from validity: that is, validity is a property of a logical argument, while truth is the property of a premise. Truth is a property of a conclusion only if both the premises are true and the argument is valid. So the question we are addressing in this chapter becomes:

*What are the characteristics of sound auto/biographical research in relation to policy decisions ?*

Further, insofar as there are different kinds of auto/biographical research, they are likely to have a differential relevance to the various possibilities and stages of policy formation. So a supplementary question addressed in this chapter is:

*What kinds of sound contribution can different forms of auto/biography make to what kinds and stages of policy decision?*

These questions depend on assumptions about how soundness should be determined. And these assumptions are, in turn, dependent on epistemological positions. So we consider these first before returning to consider these two questions directly. We shall begin by looking at the epistemology of practical, human affairs. We then go on to look in more detail at epistemological issues underpinning auto/biographical research.

#### EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE POLITICAL AND PRACTICAL

In this section we argue as follows. (1) Human institutions are made up of a plurality of unique human beings. (2) Therefore policymakers need to use an epistemology of the unique and particular. (3) What is needed is the kind of practical knowledge we can call *praxis*. (4) This kind of practical knowledge is challenged by new perspectives which (5) will result in revisions. (6) Such new perspectives may be in the form of auto/biography. (7) The continuing process of revision means that *praxis* itself is historically specific.

This volume has as one of its broad purposes the identification of the kinds of knowledge policy makers can properly use. It is, therefore, concerned with the political and practical, what Arendt calls 'the realm of human affairs' (1958, p. 13). That is, not only is it concerned with what ought to be done, and the place which knowledge has in determining that, but also it is concerned with the relationship that political decisions and actions have with knowledge. In Aristotelian terms, politics is concerned with practical wisdom rather than with contemplation of eternal truths or with expertise. Aristotle's useful distinctions are usually discussed using his original Greek terms because they have no simple translation in English (and were technical uses of common words even in ancient Greece). Aristotle distinguished the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) needed to work with practical knowledge (*praxis*) from the theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) and theoretical understanding (*episteme*) needed to carry out enquiry into timeless truths (*theoria*). *Praxis* is the kind of practical knowledge needed for the social and moral judgements made by the *phronimos* (the possessor of *phronesis*). Aristotle also distinguished practical wisdom (*phronesis*) from the expertise (*techne*) needed to apply technical knowledge (*poiesis*) when making things. We first discuss *praxis* in relation to *theoria* and then go on to discuss it in relation to *poiesis*.

#### Epistemology of the unique and particular: action and theory

Adriana Cavarero (2000) argues that the tradition of philosophy in which the unique and particular are subsumed in the universal is, at best, partial. In her (2002) article, 'Politicizing theory', she argues that 'political theory' is an oxymoron. She draws on Arendt to point out that the kind of universalising theory which contemplates abstract and universal objects is opposed to politics. In Aristotelian terms, *theoria* results in *episteme* rather than in *praxis*.

Theory, Arendt points out, pertains to the *bios theoretikos*, which is explicitly distinguished from the *bios politicos* (1958, pp. 13-14). The former is concerned with the contemplation of eternal truths. The latter is a life of (public) action concerned with the 'shared and relational space generated by the words and deeds of a plurality of human beings' (Cavarero, 2002, p.506). This plurality is to be sharply distinguished

from any concept of the many which does not acknowledge individual differences. As Arendt (1958, p. 8) writes, 'Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live. Equally it is distinguished from a concept of the many which is simply an agglomeration of individuals who do not relate to each other (like, for instance, a cinema audience). The *bios politicos* is found in the web of relationships (Arendt, 1958, p. 181) formed as a number of unique human beings come together to take collective action. As Iris Marion Young explains (2000, p. 111):

For Arendt the public is not a comfortable place of conversation among those who share language assumptions, and ways of looking at issues... The public consists of multiple histories and perspectives relatively unfamiliar to one another, connected yet distant and irreducible to one another. A conception of publicity that requires its members to put aside their differences in order to uncover their common good destroys the very meaning of publicity because it aims to turn the many into one.

Individuals do not bring about actions in the public sphere by themselves. As decision makers they are always part of a web of social relationships. Any action in the public sphere involves initiating change as part of that web of social relationships, and it is there that decision makers have an influence as unique individuals. Decision makers act in concert but it is a concert which is made up of distinct, different members. Their actions have an influence in the realm of human affairs, which is itself made up of webs of social relationship. These webs, too, are created by distinct and different human beings. This is the *bios politicos*, and it is where education policy makers find themselves.

Cavarero expands on Arendt's argument, pointing out that to try to use *theoria* to generate *phronesis* is to have confused the object of knowledge for the two forms of life, *bios theoretika* and *bios politicos*. *Theoria*, the pursuit of enquiry in the *bios theoretika*, will not result in the *praxis* needed for the *bios politicos*. She writes (2002, p. 512):

Politics asks to be studied according to its own principles insofar as politics is a field of plural interaction and hence of contingency. These principles, exemplarily illustrated by Hannah Arendt, have to do with the plurality of human beings insofar as they are unique beings rather than fictitious entities like the individual of modern political doctrine, and they have most of all to do with the relational dimension of reciprocal dependency.

Cavarero goes on to consider how a unique human being may speak to decision makers. Using the metaphor of voice, she explores the power of a unique voice to provoke a human response in the listener. That is, the listener becomes fully aware of the humanity of the speaker: a speaker who is always unique but who is also always already in relation to other human beings.<sup>2</sup>

Cavarero contrasts the account of the openness of the realm of human affairs with the lasting philosophical inheritance of Plato's desire to control the uncontrollable world of action by taking refuge in the reassuring world of theory. This is, she argues, the

meaning of the myth of the cave. Plato 'designs the just city taking as his model the idea of justice he contemplated in his mind (500e-501c) ' (Cavarero, 2002, p. 507). She goes on to point out how influential the impetus towards control has been, as evidenced by the continued ascribed primacy of theory over practice. For instance, she writes:

[Hobbes and Locke] confirm that political theory recognizes its specific object in an order -- governable and predictable, convenient and reassuring, just and legitimate -- that neutralises the potentially conflictive disorder inscribed on the natural or pre-political condition of human beings. (Cavarero, 2002, p. 511)

This is a view in which theory means applying reason to find a system (or order) which can then be put into practice.

Cavarero has pointed to a reason for the failure of 'political theory' to produce control. The impossibility of the task is not merely a contingent fact of history. It is logically impossible: a search for a mirage -- or a snark (Carroll, 1974) Human beings continually elude systems. If rational persons did agree they would assent to the same rational systems. However, they do not. Consider the Enlightenment in which both currents of political theorising can be found. On the one hand is the tradition seeking control and order, grounded in theory. On the other there is a tradition of critique (Foucault, 1984) grounded in theorising. Williams (2002, 4) points out that:

A familiar theme of contemporary criticism of the Enlightenment...[is] that it has generated unprecedented systems of oppression, because of its belief in an externalised, objective, truth about individuals and society. This represents the Enlightenment in terms of the tyranny of theory, where theory is in turn identified with an external 'panoptical' view of everything, including ourselves.

He contrasts this with another current in the Enlightenment, critique, which he argues has been a main expression of the spirit of political and social truthfulness. This spirit need not lead to anarchy. Rather, the kind of openness required by the *bios politicos* makes room for individuals to instigate change in a process of co-construction with others. In her 1963 book, *On Revolution*, Arendt commends episodes in history which were marked by change and revolution as examples of true politics but she is far from advocating perpetual revolution.

#### Epistemology of the unique and particular: action and technique

We have drawn attention to the way theory (*theoria*) consumes the particular in the universal. Another way in which the particular can be consumed in the universal is through conflating the practical knowledge needed for dealing with human beings with the practical knowledge needed for dealing with things or with law-governed behaviour (for instance, building bridges or predicting solar eclipses). This distinction is particularly significant in exploring the limitations of research into 'what works'. Aristotle distinguishes *praxis* not only from *episteme* but also from *poiesis*. Both *poiesis* and *praxis* exercise practical knowledge but they have very different relations to policy. The first, *poiesis*, is productive and has to do with making. The second, *praxis*, has to do with how one lives as a citizen and human being and has no outcome



separable from its practice. *Poiesis* requires the technical knowledge possessed by an expert. Aristotle calls this kind of knowledge *techne*. Dunne succinctly characterises this:

*Techne* then is the kind of knowledge possessed by an expert maker: it gives him a clear conception of the why and wherefore, the how and with-what of the making process and enables him, through the capacity to offer a rational account of it, to preside over his activity with secure mastery. (Dunne, 1993, p. 9)

Just as *theoria* appears to offer the prospect of order and control so does *techne*. However *poiesis* and *praxis* are different. *Praxis* requires personal wisdom and understanding, not expertise. To quote Dunne again:

[*Praxis*] is conduct in a public space with others in which a person, without ulterior purpose and with a view to no object detachable from himself, acts in such a way as to realise excellences that he has come to appreciate in his community as constitutive of a worthwhile way of life. ... *praxis* required for its regulation a kind of knowledge that was more personal and experiential, more supple and less formulable, than the knowledge conferred by *techne*. (1993, p. 10)

As the word 'excellences' indicates, to act with practical wisdom is necessarily also to act ethically. As Dunne writes, [Aristotle's] novel conception of *phronesis*, provided a rich analysis of the kind of knowledge that guides, and is well fitted to, characteristically human -- and therefore inescapably ethical -- activity (*praxis*) (Dunne and Pendlebury, 2003, p. 200).

To put this another way: as was remarked in the first section, 'Context', empirical research can only give information about what might work in certain circumstances, but the decision about what to do in any specific circumstance will always depend on normative judgements which have to be made by those who are there.

#### *Provisional knowledge and little stories*

We have been arguing that the kind of knowledge needed by policy makers is knowledge of particulars and specifics, rather than on the one hand, knowledge of universalisable theories and timeless truths, or on the other, knowledge of techniques and skills to turn out certain products. In Aristotelian terms, policy makers need to rely on *praxis* rather than, on the one hand, *sophia* and *episteme*, or on the other, *techne*. In more Arendtian terms, it is an epistemology underlying a life of (public) action rather than of labour or of contemplation.

We now go on to remark that *praxis* is open to new perspectives and understandings. It is therefore open to revision, drawing on new perspectives offered by the singular and unique stories of individual human beings. Such revision means that any decision or policy is historically specific. So neither can ever be settled once and for all: both need to respond to changing circumstances and new ideas.

Practical knowledge is developed in the realm of human affairs. Arendt's concept of natality is relevant here (Arendt, 1958). Her concept of the realm of human affairs is one that is open to change, and indeed does change as new unique human beings are

born, come into the world and use their voices to act in it in concert with others: 'The frailty of human institutions and laws and, generally, of all matters pertaining to men's living together, arises from the human condition of natality and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature' (Arendt, 1958, p. 191). Natality means that each of us is unique at the same time as being born into specific social and political contexts. Therefore, it is not just that we have not yet worked out perfect systems and strategies for age-old problems, such as how best to educate young people. And it is not just human nature that gets in the way of getting it right. It is also that real newness enters the world because of natality. New institutions appear, whether as formal or informal social groupings. New ways of looking at things change our judgements and understandings about each other.

Natality means that practical knowledge is subject to revision as new perspectives are encountered: it is always revisable. New perspectives in themselves can change what we know and do as we make practical judgements and decisions - what we perceive, what we judge to be at issue, and what we take our role to be. As Smeyers and Verhesschen (2001) argue, educational problems arise in particular situations and contexts which are always subject to change, leading to new interpretations and new meanings. They give the example of the family: 'Wide coverage of cases of child abuse...have perhaps inevitably cast the family in a different light...The context of trust has been undermined...In education we hear again the language of (children's) rights' (Smeyers and Verhesschen, 2001, p. 82).

Decisions about what to do, at every level from teachers in the classroom to national policy will change as a result of such changed perceptions and understandings.

Such changes in perceptions and understandings may be expressed in the auto/biographies of everyone involved. And their stories will capture something of the specificity and context of these changes. Cotton and Griffiths (2007) argue that auto/biographies can be told in such a way as to have the power to change the understandings of their listeners - and indeed those of the tellers - about educational policy and practice. Cotton and Griffiths draw on research which presented auto/biographies told by marginalised people in specific social, political and historical contexts. One of these was told by a young woman articulating her feelings about being in school. Another was told by teachers about a disabled boy in a dance class. Both auto/biographies were told in the context of a changing curriculum (in the areas of mathematics and creativity, respectively) and illuminate some of the implications for social justice in schooling.

The continuing process of revision means that practical knowledge (*praxis*) is historically specific. Research of all kinds helps educators keep up with changing circumstances and ideas. We have made this argument focusing on auto/biography but it is also true of other research methods.<sup>3</sup>

#### QUESTIONS OF TRUTH AND VALIDITY IN AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

If auto/biographies are a necessary part of an epistemology suitable for policy, then there must be ways of determining whether they can be trusted, whether they are sound. There are two ways in which such soundness may be challenged. Firstly it may be challenged on the grounds of truth. Secondly its validity may be challenged. We take each in turn.

### Truthfulness

The question about truth is complicated by the academic arguments that rage in social sciences and the humanities about the nature of truth. These arguments are many-sided and complex. There is no space here to do more than allude to them. Bridges' influential article (2005) summarises some mainstream philosophical discussions about different theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, etc) in relation to education. These theories are discussed further in Heikkinen *et al.* (2000, 2001) and in Hulton (2001). Other discussions are influenced by postfoundational philosophies. Walker and Unterhalter (2004) discuss the significance of multiple perspectives, experiences and interpretations when judging how far to trust a story or set of stories. MacLure (2003) draws on Derrida and Foucault to argue that truths are always textual, discursive and suffused with power relations. Such truths cannot be straightforwardly reported, she argues. Lugones (1989) in a discussion of marginalised identity, expresses this as:

So we know truths that *only the fool can speak* and only the trickster can play out without harm. (Lugones, 1989: 285) [ italics added]

Bernard Williams (2002 ) suggests a useful strategy for sidestepping some of the arguments about the nature of truth. He proposes that we focus less on truth and more on truthfulness. He points out that sceptics about truth within the humanities and social sciences nevertheless exhibit 'this demand for truthfulness or (to put it less positively) this reflex against deceptiveness' even though 'there is an equally pervasive suspicion about truth itself' (Williams, 2002, p. 1). He usefully distinguishes two basic virtues associated with truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity. He points out that 'each of the basic virtues of truth involves certain kinds of resistance to what moralists might call temptation – to fantasy and the wish' (p.45). It is relatively simple to judge accuracy and sincerity in the case of reporting facts about 'middle sized dry goods', to use J.L. Austin's phrase. Similarly, it is relatively simple when discussing shared contexts. Judging accuracy and sincerity in the case of auto/biography is trickier. However, it is a familiar trickiness. In ordinary life we listen to and tell auto/biographies all the time. We need to judge how far the stories we hear are accurate and told with sincerity. We know, and indeed expect, them to be partial, self-serving, entertaining, persuasive and to draw on imperfect memories. All this is an inevitable part of understanding the unique and particular, the singular, individual voice. And it is routinely understood, as individual voices are, with the aid of intelligence and wisdom drawn partly from personal experience and partly from knowledge gained from other sources.

First it is necessary to be clear what there is in an auto/biography to be accurate and sincere about. Most obviously there are facts about the memories being recounted: time, place, observable behaviour, etc. Secondly there are the feelings that accompany these memories. Feelings can be reported and also they will also affect how the facts are reported. Facts and feelings are rarely reported (or even reportable) in neutral terms. As Walker and Unterhalter observe: 'Our stories do not speak for themselves, nor do they provide unmediated access to other times, places or cultures' (2004, pp. 285-6). Interpretation is unavoidable<sup>4</sup>, and the feelings of the participant will affect the interpretations made. Finally, even as the facts and feelings are reported, the way they are understood and reported is responsive to who the audience is. Stroobants gives an example. Reflecting on research interviews about the learning process, she remarks:

It was not only me as a researcher who was trying to understand the stories in terms of learning. When telling their life story, the women were actively giving meaning to their life experiences...During the interviews some of the women gained insight...they could see some work experiences in a different light. (Stroobants, 2005, p. 50)

Walker and Unterhalter (2004) provide another example of the effect of the audience. They argue that the lack of a feminist ethos in the audience for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission changed how women's stories of rape and sexual humiliation were told.

Judging accuracy and sincerity is, then, precisely a matter for judgement, for weighing evidence, rather than a matter of rules or protocols. Researchers need to make such judgements and also to give an indication of how they made them, using evidence of how the auto/biographical accounts were produced, with what intended audience, for what purpose, and setting the judgment within as full an understanding of the cultural, political and personal contexts as could be obtained. We give two contrasting instances of how this may be done.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction to the hugely influential book, *Tell them from me* is exemplary. Gow and McPherson begin by explaining that:

[These accounts] have been written by young people who left school in Scotland in the second half of the 1970s...The book is about their experience, their opinions and feelings, about their grudges and gratitude. It is about the way education, work and employment seemed to young people. (Gow and McPherson, 1980, p.3)

The following subheadings then structure the discussion preceding the accounts: 'Whose writings are these and why did they write?' 'Is the writing honest? For whom did leavers think they were writing?' 'How was the selection of writings made?' 'How can we achieve better understanding and better practice?' The second of these subheadings is particularly interesting. The question of audience and accuracy/sincerity are taken together. Reasons for believing the young people had no reason to 'play to' any group, are given, as are reasons for both trusting - and mistrusting - written accounts. Finally, Gow and McPherson write:

We cannot, either logically or empirically, exclude the possibility that, once they had decided to comment, some at least commented mainly on what they had experienced as negative aspects of their schooling. Whether such an orientation constitutes bias can, in part, be left to the reader to judge. The writings that follow may occasionally read as resentful, unperceptive, hostile or partial. But do we feel in reading them that they were offered dishonestly, maliciously or frivolously? Their transparency seems evident and their cumulative impact is convincing. For example the disturbingly similar stories told by leaver after leaver in the opening chapters on belting, truancy and the neglect of non-certificate classes in fact reflect pupils' experiences of more than 80 schools; the events were experienced, and the accounts were written, mainly in isolation one from another. (Gow and McPherson, 1980, p.13)

Stroobants describes another way of approaching the task of explaining how the stories told to her may be judged by the reader as accurate and sincere.

I write in detail about how my grounded interpretation developed and grew, trying to do justice to...the stories...and to my own interpretation by alternately telling the life story of one particular woman in the story of my interpretive analysis process. I also systematically describe and account for the methodological steps I took, elaborating my considerations and reflections... in order for the reader to be able... to judge the quality of the research report, the research results and the craftsmanship of the researcher. (2005, p.56)

### Validity

Like the question of truth, the question about validity is complicated by academic arguments within social sciences. So far, we have been tacitly assuming a meaning for 'validity' which is derived from formal logic. That is, validity refers to reasoning rather than to facts. However, the term, like 'truth', is subject to fierce debate within social science and the humanities. Much of this debate seems to be a response to the specialised use of the term in the natural sciences. The natural sciences have developed a specialised, technical vocabulary suitable for themselves. In this discourse, 'validity' determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. One response has been post-modern playfulness. Suggestions for alternative understandings of validity include 'rhizomatic validity' or 'ironic validity', as suggested by Patti Lather (1994). Altheide and Johnson (1998) list 'successor validity', 'catalytic validity' and 'transgressive validity' among others. Another response has been to ditch the concept altogether as being bound up with the quest for certainty (Altheide and Johnson, 1998). In some discussions, 'validity' appears to have been equated with 'quality', as in the two linked articles by Hannu *et al.* (2007) and Feldman (2007).

But social science and the humanities need not, and should not, be so reactive to definitions in the natural sciences. Instead we begin the discussion about validity from a more ordinary understanding of the term, (which does not require either measurement or certainty) and go on to refine this into a more specialised, technical meaning suitable for discussing auto/biography.

We start from the common understanding of validity to be found in a dictionary definition. In this we follow J.L. Austin's comment that distinctions 'in ordinary language work well for practical purposes' and this is 'no mean feat': 'ordinary language is *not* the last word...but it *is* the *first* word (Austin, 1979, p.185.) This strategy has the advantage that it builds on what generations of human beings have needed to say when making judgements about the stories they are told. The strategy leaves us free not to start from measurement. 'Valid' was not originally a word especially associated with measurement. Rather it comes from the Latin *validus*, meaning 'strong'. The dictionary definition makes clear that there are various well known ways in which this can be understood. Merriam-Webster (2006-7) provides the following four current definitions: (1) legal efficacy or force; (2) well grounded or justifiable: being at once relevant and meaningful; (3) having a conclusion correctly derived from premises; (4) appropriate to the end in view – effective (as in 'every

craft has its valid method'). The first of these is evidently not relevant here. The second, third and fourth are applicable, however. We take each in turn briefly describing the kinds of issue that need to be taken into account.

The second definition of validity draws attention to the way that a story might be truthful – both accurately and sincerely told – and yet not be germane to the matter in hand. For an auto/biography to be relevant and significant it needs to be shown to be so with regard to its representativeness and/or the possibility it provides of re-framing the understanding of what is at issue. Sometimes auto/biographies are significant precisely because they are ordinary. That is, they show something of the lived experience of ordinary life in all its complexity and everyday differences between contexts. For instance, the stories of the student and the teachers in Cotton and Griffiths' (2007) study are like this. They are unique, individual, personal - but they are not atypical. That is their significance. In contrast, auto/biographies may be significant precisely because they are *not* ordinary. The significance may arise because auto/biography is rarely heard from such an individual. Think, for instance, of very high and very low achievers in educational terms. And, again, some voices are much easier to hear than others, as feminist and Black scholarship has demonstrated over the last few decades. The auto/biographies of people marginalised for reasons of gender, race, disability and social class have much to offer to those decision makers striving for equality in education. Finally, an auto/biography may be relevant because of the way it helps its audience reframe an issue, by make the familiar strange, and giving a different perspective on what was previously taken for granted.<sup>6</sup>

The third definition of validity draws attention to the kinds of conclusion that would be drawn from a truthful narrative, even after issues of representativeness, bias and the possibilities of reframing have been considered. This is the area of criticality, and it points to a very large area in narrative studies, one that we can only allude to here. The key issues here are representation, genre and literary quality. Representation refers to the way that an auto/biography is presented not only by the teller but also by the researcher who is re-presenting it. All representation involves choices and judgements. The editing and framing of the story obviously require judgement. But so does the form in which it is told, what choices have been made about the medium in which is presented, and whether is presented as finished and definite or as just one possible presentation among many. Closely related to representation are the issues of genre and literary quality. The first refers to the way that any story is influenced by the genres available to the teller – both those of the original teller and those of the researcher. These include the wish for an expected happy and tragic ending, indeed for an ending at all: in short, for the auto/biography to work *as* a story. Literary quality draws on genre, but, for some researchers, it can also be a wider concern than this. For instance, one of Renuka Vithal's four conditions for what she refers to as a 'crucial description', is 'transformacy': the potential for it to effect transformative change in the reader (Vithal, 2002). This must be, at least partly, a matter of literary quality. Controversially, literary quality may also be associated with the use of fiction in the presentation of auto/biography. Walker and Unterhalter (2004) discuss the account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's evidence by the South African Broadcasting Corporation journalist, Antjie Krog. In her book drawn from her two years reporting the Commission, she uses fiction about herself in order to present the stories more truthfully. This relates to the fourth of the dictionary definitions above, too, since literary quality is part of the craft of story- telling.

The third definition not only draws attention to criticality but also to reflexivity. Conclusions are never drawn straightforwardly from stories. They are layered, and subject to a range of interpretations. They may be constructed and re-constructed according to the intentions and ideologies of the audience and the researcher. Gaps are noted. The teller's intentions are assessed. The relation between the teller, audience and researcher is brought into focus. The personal story of the researcher also becomes significant, as does the relation that is drawn between the story and other educational research and policies. Explicit reflexivity on the part of the researcher allows the reader to be reflexive too.

*Truthful and valid auto/biography.*

We have argued that it is the responsibility of the researcher to present an auto/biography in such a way that judgements can be made about its truthfulness and validity. And it is also the responsibility of the researcher to present the auto/biography so that make the audience for the research is in a position to be able to make these kinds of critical assessment too. This is the difference between auto/biographical research and other kinds of personal story (auto/biography in general, anecdote, parable, gossip, etc). We have argued that sound auto/biographical research needs to show that the researcher has taken account of the following.

- (1) Truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity.
- (2) Representativeness.
- (3) Representation.
- (4) Re-framing of the matter at hand.
- (5) Genre.
- (6) Literary quality.
- (7) Reflexivity.

Finally, and crucially, epistemologically sound auto/biographical research should be presented in such a way that readers can form their own assessment of its soundness. As in all research the story of researcher tells has itself to be shown to be trustworthy.

#### CAN AND SHOULD POLICY MAKERS USE AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH?

In this final section, the paper draws together the discussion on policy with that on the epistemological issues. It is proposed that at some stages of the policy cycle auto/biography and life writing research can, and in some cases can and should, be taken account of. Similarly it is suggested that auto/biography and life writing research is more or less appropriate for different levels and subjects of policy. Some examples are noted along with observations of where the scope of auto/biographical research could be extended.

In order to say that auto/biographical research *can* influence policy one might want to find examples of instances in which it *has* influenced policy. However assessing the impact of research is notoriously difficult (Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2007). As noted above the policy-making process is neither simple nor linear, and it is not always clear who is involved; even if it were and even if we had reports of what did or did not exert influence, we would probably not hear the full story. However perhaps all that is needed to demonstrate the potential to influence is examples of situations in which auto/biography had such potential in the past, and examples of this kind are easier to find. The work of Gow and McPherson (1980) has already been

noted: this research continues to be cited in government documents over 20 years later (Scottish Parliament, 2002). Indeed government education departments throughout the UK are not only receptive to but actively seek out research which focuses on the experiences of individuals, much of which is collected in the form of personal stories. Munn *et al's* (2005) work on the deployment of additional staff to support behaviour in schools focused not only on what worked but also on why and in what contexts, exploring as it did the individual circumstances of staff and young people (Munn 2005). The Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) has recently commissioned research on the experiences of young people permanently excluded from special schools and Pupil Referral Units in England and Wales, in which hearing the stories of these young people is a key element (Pirie and Macleod, 2007).

So, taking our weaker criterion - that auto/biography might have influenced policy - it is clear that this is easily met. The question then becomes *ought* auto/biography to influence policy, and, if so, which types/ levels of policy and at what stage. We have outlined the ways in which soundness can be established. We have shown that it is the responsibility of the researcher to show how readers can judge whether this has been done. We now go on to explore the different kinds of way in which auto/biographical research might influence policy.

There are some areas of study to which auto/biographical research can be seen as being particularly well suited. First, the experiences of people at the margins, such as those whose lives intersect more than one dimension of difference such as race, class, gender, disability, or sexuality. Narrative research has been presented as a method for giving a stage to the voices of people who traditionally have had not been heard (e.g. Casey, 1995/6). As Biesta (2007) has observed, one of the roles of 'cultural' educational research is to allow the 'known' to be re-examined from a new perspective, perhaps shedding light on established hierarchies and problematising the taken-for-granted. Auto/biography, with its focus on examining the life of the individual in context, seems particularly well-suited for this purpose. Studies which address the experiences of people at the margins of our education system examine what it is like for those for whom the generalisations generated by other forms of research are unlikely to hold true. Their 'little stories' have the potential to refine the 'bigger picture' drawn by other studies. But should taking account of the personal be restricted to those at the margins? What of the personal experiences of those who do not find themselves on the edge? If the political is indeed personal then that holds for all, including those in the 'mainstream' and so a case can be made for saying that policy-makers *ought* to take account of auto/biographical research conducted with 'the generality' and not only the extremes.

Secondly, research into experiences that unfold over time can be examined through longitudinal studies as people are followed over a number of years. However a number of years are not always at the researchers' (not to mention policy-makers') disposal. In such circumstances researchers who are interested in transitions often utilise life-history approaches. Examples of work of this type includes that by Watts and Bridges (2004) on aspirations of 16-19 year olds; McDowell's (2001) work with working-class young men, and Jones, O'Sullivan and Rouse (2004) examining school-to-work transitions. All of these studies have at heart the questions of what does it feel like, what meanings do people make of, being in those situations over time, and



these cannot be answered except through an auto/biographical approach. Similarly Brannen, Mooney and Statham's work on care careers, following the lives of childcare workers, is being conducted with the express purpose of informing policy on recruitment into this area of employment (Thomas Coram Research Unit, 2007). So longitudinal accounts of what it is like to live through or in a particular system utilises research which draws on the stories of individuals involved.

Finally, there may be areas of research in which large-scale quantitative studies, whilst being able to paint broad strokes, fail to capture the nuances of extremely complex situations. An example of this is studies into youth resilience, in particular Michael Ungar's international work on the cultural specificity of resilience and the particular insights which can be gained from adding a narrative dimension to a research design (Ungar, 2004; 2006).

There are also stages of the policy process to which auto/biographical studies are particularly suited. Bridges and Watts (this volume) describe the complexities of the policy-making process: it is an iterative process which can start at the bottom, in the middle or at the top (Nutley *et al.*, 2007).<sup>7</sup> Auto/biographical research may identify a problem which policy may be required to address, viewing things from a different perspective and thus identifying previously hidden issues - that is, it can contribute to the setting of the policy-agenda. Auto/biography has a contribution to make to the refinement of policy, its evaluation and 'fine tuning'. Finally, because of the ability of auto/biography to capture the individual experience in the wider social context, and to represent complex and nuanced situations, this approach has a contribution to make not simply to questions of 'what works?' but issues such as why, when and in what circumstances what works works, and why, when and where it doesn't.

Thus auto/biography has a contribution to make to particular areas of study and to some parts of the policy-making process especially, but at the same time the policy discourse assumes that it lacks credibility as a sound way of conducting research to inform policy. The 'what works' agenda has become a discourse defining 'the limits of acceptable speech' (Butler, 1990) about the types of research which are taken seriously by policy-makers. However, whilst it has not been easy to find *evidence* of examples of auto/biographical research informing policy it is clear that contrary to popular belief auto/biographical research is alive and well. So dominant is the notion that the only research which is being commissioned is in the 'what works' tradition that examples of government-sponsored research that are more auto/biographical in approach pass under the radar; we assume it is not happening because, of course, it couldn't be. However, scratch the surface and there it is. For instance, consider the following: Brannen, Stratham, Mooney and Brockmann, 2007; Cameron, Bennert, Simon and Wigfall, 2007; Cunningham and Hargreaves, 2007; Evans, Pinnock, Beirens and Edwards, 2006. They are all research projects using at least an element of auto/biographical method and all published on the Department for Children, Schools and Families website.

In short, research continues to use auto/biographic approaches where these are the best way of addressing the issue or question to hand. However the power of the policy discourse is such that these approaches barely dare to speak their name, but rather hide under blanket terms such as 'qualitative' and 'case-study'. Ungar (2006) gives some interesting examples. He writes about strategies he has used to persuade

funders to give money for qualitative research (including life history work) - including 'dressing up' to make it look like quantitative research and 'sleeping with the elephant' - tacking a qualitative aspect onto a larger quantitative study. In this paper we have suggested criteria by which the soundness of auto/biographical research may be assessed. It is hoped that by so doing policy-makers may be able to have more confidence in taking account of research of this type, without comparing it against criteria designed for different approaches.

On the grand level of what education is for auto/biographical research can offer insights. Smeyers and Verhesschen (2001) write that 'Freeing us from the idea that education must have a fixed and unified meaning will change what we want to do in education' (Smeyers and Verhesschen, 2001 p. 80). They are talking about philosophy, but their argument also works for auto/biography, not surprisingly since the title of the paper is 'Narrative analysis as philosophical research'.

Auto/biographical research has properly been used by policy makers and could be used more. It should continue to be a significant part of the evidence base for policy. Auto/biographical research is an essential contribution to the practical knowledge needed by policy makers. We have shown that it has a sound epistemological basis, when it is presented critically and reflexively, and with attention paid to how far it is truthful and valid: accurate, sincere, representative.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Of course, with space limited we omit much more than we include. The decisions about what to leave out should not in any way be taken as a judgement of their importance or potential contribution to the question at hand, simply that the issues that we do take up are those which we judge most germane to the focus of this article. For example it is not within the remit of this paper to conduct a detailed examination of the defining features of narrative research, e.g. Ricoeur's work on the relationship between temporality and narrative; the notion of human life as 'storied'; the rhetorical power of narrative; conceptualisations of the 'self'; developmental aspects of narrative; the general philosophical discussion of epistemology and 'testimony'; psycho-social approaches to narrative and memory; etc.

<sup>2</sup> There is much more that could be added here about the phenomenology of human presence. For instance, see Sartre's (1958) influential discussion of the Look and how it cuts through the attempt to make the Other into an object. (See especially pp. 258-9.) Similarly Gaita (1998) discusses the sense of the preciousness of each human being which he distinguishes from concepts such as inalienable human rights, or persons as ends in themselves. There is also something to be said about how we can lose that sense or have it brought into our attention. He quotes Weil: if you want to become invisible, there is no surer way than to become poor' (Gaita, 1998, p. 10).

<sup>3</sup> In a number of publications Griffiths has argued for the view that reliable knowledge is always provisional and revisable (Griffiths 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> For more on facts and their interpretation, see Griffiths, 1998, Chapter 4.



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<sup>5</sup> We have not included a discussion of truthfulness to be found in fiction. It is an interesting, relevant subject but we have not the space to examine it here.

<sup>6</sup> See Smeyers useful discussion of ‘opening up the sphere of responsiveness’, drawing on Wittgenstein and Cavell. (Smeyers, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> As Nutley, Walter and Davies (2007) clearly show policy-making is not a simple linear process which always operates from the top-down, rather it is a complex and interactive process between practitioners, organisations and policy settings. Educational policy can be characterised as varying across four key dimensions. First is the substantive area addressed, e.g., pupil assessment, teacher training, social justice. Second is the level at which the policy is to be applied, e.g., pupil, classroom, school, or authority. Third is the stage of the policy cycle: identification of the problem and agenda setting, analysis, creation, legislation and/or adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Fourth is the source of policy change (Doyle, 1997; Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007): research; locally accepted mythologies and symbols; models of change (e.g. a technical-rational prescribe and intervene vs the diagnose and understand approach); and personal experience. All of these are moderated by the influence of global trends and the extent to which travelling policy becomes colonised by local context and embedded policy (Ozga, 2006)