

Beyond Narcissism and Hero-worshipping: Life History Research and Narrative Inquiry¹

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Abstract

Life history research is often misunderstood to be a celebratory hero-worshipping of the subject whose biography is being constructed. This paper argues that life history research is not a vainglorious narcissistic narrative exercise, but instead is an approach to developing of qualitative in-depth insight into a theoretical phenomenon. The chosen individual's life and the narrativising about the intersected complexity of their life and experiences becomes a means to examine the phenomenon under exploration by providing potentially generative elucidation for further research. Examples of what is not life history research form the backdrop to contrast with more recent uses of the methodological approach in the field of educational research. The studies explore the intersection between epistemology, methodology and positionality in which the researchers theorise phenomena such as individual professional development trajectories, the engagement with speech language therapy, the development of curriculum in higher education and evaluations of organisations through institutional biographies. The rigorous data production and analysis strategies employed reveal the prospect of the approach as a useful contribution to social studies research.

Keywords: Kinds of truth, life history research, narrative inquiry, life history studies in education

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History is an angel being blown backwards into the future
(Lather & Smithies 1997: 54).

Peruse the shelves of many commercial bookstores today and one is bound to encounter the proliferation of celebratory biographies, even constituting a specialist marketing category to attract would-be customers. One is usually in no doubt that the rise of the ‘vanity biography’ fulfils the curiosity factor which sells tabloid newspapers and is further legitimised by the voluminous biographies, usually constructed by ghost writers employed by the rich and famous. Even the infamous see the marketing possibility of authoring a biography which outlines their rise or fall to ascendancy or descendancy. The obsession to peep into the lives beyond the high fences of security cocoons, the fetish with the unattainable or the decadent, the interest to provide examples of rags-to-riches stories fascinates those who are seduced to believe that these exemplary life trajectories are replicable in their own. It is interesting to note that some biographies are being constructed even before individuals have reached age thirty: hardly a lengthy life at all in the context of increased life expectancy of the 21st century! However, inspirational these biographies purport to be, they are largely about commercialisation and commodification of these lives. It becomes even more concerning when the authorship of the ‘auto’-biography is quite clearly not the individual super hero film star, politician and or sport hero himself or herself. Biographies are supposedly being constructed about these heroes too, even when they sanction them or not. Competing biographies are constructed over a single person’s life, creating multiple vantage points about the authenticity of the life itself. Even autobiographies (self-authored) are deemed to be contestable.

A fascinating book by Bill Bryson (2007) chooses to explore whether noted historical figures such as William Shakespeare even existed at all. Was his life/ biography a fictional creation? Some even argue that the famous heroic characters such as Marco Polo did not even exist, but are convenient mythological creations to construct notions of Empire and Exploration. Historical records of the life and battles of Julius Caesar (*bella gentis*) could be argued to be careful propagandist agendas to reinforce political and social control of Roman power. Some of these battles emerge entirely implausible pragmatically and operationally. The construction of history too might arguably be seen to be simply a quest to present specific convenient and

accepted truths not about the past, but about how the present powers wish the past to be remembered (Wassermann & Bryan 2010). Historical heroes become means to cement present, not past accepted values. All of the above certainly raises the question of what kinds of truth are being generated through the constructing of narratives and life histories. This also raises serious questions about life history research methodology which is increasingly becoming a fashionable counterpoint to the normative and dominant quantitative mode of research endeavours.

In this paper I will argue that these different kinds of truth-making noted above pose a baseline from which to explore the role of the life history researchers as they employ methods of data production, analysis and representation such a narrative research (Section One). What are the purposes of life history research and narrative research? Whose interests are being served in generating these conceptions of life history research? I will argue that we need to distinguish the specific characteristics which make life history research a ‘research endeavour’ and not a commercial (or crass ideological) venture. I will provide examples of how the life history research agenda has taken shape within the field of education (Section Two). This paper does not aim to suggest that the other forms of biographical work are not useful as social or entertainment titillation. Instead it will argue that life history research needs to be cautious of its need for rigour, attention to validation, authentication and trustworthiness considerations. Anything less deserves the criticisms levelled by opponents who do not see its value beyond ‘intellectual masturbation’- disguised attempts at self-satisfaction and narcissistic hero-worship.

Section One: A Lens into the Epistemology and Methodology of Life History Research

Kinds of Truth and Truth-making

The Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC Report 1998) in post-apartheid South Africa has received much attention as a strategy to address the process of moving beyond the need for legalistic retribution and legal justice against perpetrators of violence and subjugation. In the commentary on the TRC agenda, the chair of the commission, Desmond Tutu argues that the act of re-telling one’s implicatedness in the atrocities of apartheid was a

public means of sharing the horrors of exploitation of humanity (*ibid.*). The perpetrator was granted amnesty for revealing the details of the events which led to the physical torture, abuse and death of those who campaigned in defense of the apartheid system. The process of narrating these lived experiences was seen as potentially restorative, not only for the victim who was offered explanations of how their loved ones were brutalised, but also for the perpetrators who saw the possibility of choosing alternative paths for their further lives.

Those who were critical of the TRC *modus operandi* felt that it offered a ‘soft fuzzy’ cop out of taking responsibility and accountability for perpetrators’ evil deeds. A Nuremberg type trial was preferred to generate lists of criminals who could languish in prison as punishment. The TRC report (*ibid.*) clarified that the commission was aiming to recognise that several ‘truths’ potentially co-exist, each with different conceptions of epistemological worth. Legal or factual truths serve the purpose of establishing the veracity of events, participants’ actions and deeds. The courts of legal justice are geared towards establishing such ‘*scientific truths*’. However, as human beings, we inherit interpretations of the world through ‘*dialogical truths*’, which are multiple, conflictual and varied. The acceptance of a thread of truth as an agreed social explanation is understood as produced and is producing conceptions that are socially accepted. In contrast, individuals construct ‘*personalised truths*’ drawn from their own unique lived experiences within the social system. This embeds social, political, ideological, cultural and psychological understandings of events, practices and deeds. This latter kind of truth is often constructed in dialogue with dominantly held truths at macro-level. The fourth truth type that is referred to in the TRC is a ‘*healing or restorative truth*’. This form of truth-telling or truth-making is not overtly concerned with the ‘actual scientific fact’ (*did the event actually occur?*); it links into the way in which the experienced truth (*what sense did I make of the interpretations around me?*) intersects with the dominant social truths (*what do most people agree or say happened?*) Moreover, ‘healing truths’ are aiming to allow persons narrativising the telling to form their own explanations and critiques of what moral or ethical pathways they undertook; how they themselves are implicated in the unfolding of events. This last form of truth-making has the potential to allow the perpetrator to engage with a possibility of reconstruction and reconciliation with the victims they offended. The deep emotional and

intellectual, and perhaps spiritual cleansing, is what the TRC aimed to generate, as part of the reconstruction of a post-apartheid South Africa.

In the *Handbook on Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin 2007), a further distinction is offered to distinguish between '*lived as lived*' (forensic truths), '*lives as experienced*' (social and dialogical truths) and '*lived as told*': how selective the memory-making process, infused with elements of nostalgia, or the limits of the capacity of the memory process, or the psychological process of subverting and /or celebrating one's own agency (and/or victimhood) within the re-telling. The act of narrativising a life history is thus infused with several co-existing elements that are to be interrogated by the researcher interpreting how the context, audience and purpose of the 'telling of the tale' is an act of creating an interpretation of one's world, one's past, present and future.

The TRC has been suggested by some to have become a romanticised re-constructivist agenda (Govinder, Zondo & Makgoba 2013). Some have even argued that it was simply a pragmatic way of obviating the flooding of the legal system with cases seeking victimhood and vanquished status. Some argue that it is a strategic plot to sanitise racialised and tribalised agendas lurking within the apartheid psyche: a means to build a new South African nationalist identity. Life history research inherits these multiple facets of truth and truth-making into its research agenda. It locates itself at the intersection between these varieties of truth-making efforts yet moves towards generating deep accounts of social experience from individuals' points of view. This view of the social system is recognised to be a first-hand subjective experience that is not sanitised from one's social, cultural, historical, biographical and contextual biographies. The complexity rather than the reduction to single truths is explored in the process of life history research. Usually the life history research chooses multiple case studies of different/ similar participants to make a theoretical argumentation. It aims to generate with its participants retrospective accounts of the past, yet providing insightful interpretation of how individuals make sense of their present and their future. The act of writing the narrative life history project itself is imbued with the process of restoring, healing and re-interpreting through dialogical interaction between the researcher and the researched. The act of constructing the life history research narrative account is itself a theorising process (Reddy 2000; Dhunpath & Samuel 2009). We live storied lives and a simplistic reduction to only factual forensic type interpretations reduces our humanity.

As a methodological approach life history research has many historical antecedents including anthropology, literature studies, psychology, sociology, historical studies. Each of these disciplines has spawned theoretical interpretations of their disciplines or fields drawing on their interpretations, theories and models. These interpretations of what constitutes ‘the discipline’ shift over time or contexts as well. Hence, it is likely that the varied definitions of life history abound in relation to the multiplicity of paradigmatic perspectives available in each of these sub- and intersecting disciplinary trajectories. For example, it may be argued that all of fictional narrative literature is a process of documenting, reinterpreting, fictionalising the ‘truths’ that exist socially, anthropologically, psychologically, culturally socially and politically. Every novel, each narrative account is but a representation of the worldview of its creators and their relationship to the world and persons they lived amongst. This is perhaps even true of science-fiction literature in which imagined possibilities of the world order is engaged as a philosophical and theoretical exploration of the material, geographic and social world in which we presently live. By definition then, life history must be interested in multiplicity, multi-disciplinarity, and heightened subjective, contextualised awareness.

What Life History is Not, and What It is

However, life history research (LHR) is not simply a singular immediate perspective of self-reflection. The aim of life history is not to construct a diary of sequenced chronological interpretation of events. It is not a story-telling exercise merely to recall the stages of development over time and space. It is not about a journalistic recording of events to apportion blame or culpability. It is not an attempt to sensationalise or romanticise the social system. Paradoxically, LHR is not overtly aimed to provide therapeutic intervention. The effect of constructing a LHR account might have the consequence of providing ‘healing truths’, but this is not its founding operational intention. Ultimately LHR is a *research approach*, a process of re-searching, re-looking at accepted truths in circulation around a particular phenomenon².

² I note my own paradigmatic preference in this stance.

The life historian is a researcher who aims to analyse, interpret, make sense of how individuals recall their experiences, how individuals make sense of the events, structures of society or patterns of behaviour within their environment. The life history research (LHR) historian is one acutely concerned with how memories are remembered, not whether these memories are in themselves accurate or true (in the sense of forensic truth). The life historian researcher is working to gauge the truth-making of his/her participants against a theoretical framework which previously exists amongst the dominant literature, amongst dominant theoretical perspectives and previous research studies about the phenomenon. The life historian engages his/her participants in construction and reconstructing of these narrative accounts and integrates them into a discursive analytical narrative account capturing the richness of the lived contextual world views of the participants. More often researchers chose more than simply a single case to construct a biographical life history research project. Having several potentially competing cases from within the social system providing their conflictual or convergent interpretations of their histories may be a part of the methodological pursuit. In this way the choices of sampling is a theoretical purposive procedure (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). The following table contrasts the choices of sampling within life history research compared to the traditional conceptions of empirical studies.

Table 1: Sampling strategies within life history research and traditional empirical studies

	Life history research	Traditional empirical studies
Type of sampling strategy	Strategic sampling	Random sampling
Who is chosen?	The sample (person/s) is/are chosen because of WHAT they can say rather than whom they represent	Every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected into the sample

Why are they chosen?	Chosen because they typify some socio-historical circumstances/ process Historiographical sampling Chosen because they are articulate and can illuminate the phenomenon being studied/ understand the complexity of the phenomenon being researched Can be purposively selected: handpicked on the basis of their typicality	Statistical
What is the relationship to the research hypothesis and theory building process?	Hypothesis generating Theory producing	Hypothesis testing Theory testing
What is the goal of the end point of the research process?	Is the starting point for new ideas or further research	Aiming at arrival at a position of certainty
What kind of theory is the research process aiming to produce?	Local theory	Grand theory

(Adapted from Reddy 2000).

Analysing Narrative Research and Life History Data

Each pursuit of the telling of the narrative life history is analysed against the theoretical framework which the researcher chooses to set out at the commencement of the project. This does not mean that the act of

narrativising is simply a matter of the research imposing his/her worldview or theoretical framework onto the lived experiences of the participants. The act of constructing the narrative and its analysis might be collaboratively and analytically constructed with the researcher and his or her participants, individually or collectively (Freeman & Richards 1996). The data produced during the narrative construction is regarded as potentially only a first level of construction ('narrative analysis') (Clandinin & Connnelly 2000). The researcher is still then obliged to generate further insight through an 'analysis of the narrative' (Polkinghorne 1995): making sense of the narrative.

The analysis of the narrative can take multiple strategies sometimes used in conjunction with each other. For example, the first stage of analysis of the narrative may be drawing from the tradition of 'grounded analysis': where the constructed narrative story is subjected to a codifying of recurring concepts, aggregated into themes and conjoined into thematic clusters (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Alternatively (or consequently), the research might engage with the act of 'hypothesis testing': checking to see whether the recurring categories of *a priori* theoretical categories which explain the phenomenon under investigation, are indeed present in the data (Miles & Huberman 1984). A compromise data analytical strategy could involve the participants in the sense-making of the constructed narrative in a 'negotiated analysis' (Freeman & Richards 1996). All of these strategies of data analytical techniques should ideally be anticipated before the researcher enters the field, thus making opportunity for creative and multiple sources of data for the construction of the narrative and /or potential co-constructors of the life history research report itself. Multiple data sources could be invoked, not only the oral telling through interviewing. Potential 'texts' available for theorising include photographs, artwork, documents, collective group interviews, architecture of spaces occupied and used by the biographer and biographed.

It is against the above broadening of possibilities that the need for clarity of an operational definition of what is life history research is needed. This definition recognises the biases and theoretical perspective of the author. Acknowledging such is to declare that it is possible that multiple perspectives of what is life history are likely to emerge from different theoretical vantages. The working definition of life history which has guided the selected examples in Section Two below is as follows:

Life history research is a theoretical research approach which aims to explore, interpret and analyse the told and silenced stories, the narrativised accounts by individuals who interpret, re-interpret and exaggerate their memories in the act of remembering, in dialogues with the contextual settings within which participants presently live.

The act of creating a life history record is *time- and space-linked* in that it codifies the process of memory-making which provides an insight into how individuals/ groups of individuals choose to remember their past within particular moments. The *context, audience and purpose* of the telling of the narrative account are embedded into the kind of narrative that is constructed. The aim of the life history is to uncover these multiple truth-making in order to *expand, refine or develop new theoretical understandings* of existing or prospective phenomena. A telling of a life history is against the backdrop of an existing framework which provides the initial analytical lens which frames the methodological data gathering process. Importantly, the life history researcher is an analyst, an interpreter of these stories. The life history narrative record is not simply about the biographical account itself, but about what this biographical account can inform, illuminate, and help provide insight into the social phenomenon that is the topic of the life history research project. The obligation of the life historian researcher is not simply to record the story, the narrative, the life historical biography, but to analyse and help develop theoretical insight. The life history researcher is a theory-builder, a historian in the sense of not simply recording events, but of making interpretation of the world in which we have lived and in which presently live.

This definition implies that the life historian researcher should be conscious of the attempt *not to glamourise the subject's worldview or positionality*. S/he should be aware that some of the telling of narrative accounts (by the participants) may be infused by nostalgia and celebratory self-glorification and that the historian's role is to filter a more abstract analysis (*why does the participant choose to re-present their lives the way they do?*). The audience of the tale could equally be implicated in the kind of tales that research participants offer. Nevertheless, the analysis process will attempt to interpret how and why individuals choose to remember and re-tell their memories the way they do (Dhunpath & Samuel 2009).

The Researcher and the Researched

It is an accepted qualitative conundrum which points out that the specific historical categories of race, gender, age and *researcher stance and positionality* (i.e. the relationship to the context, the phenomenon and the participants) could influence the nature of the kind of data that is produced. After all the audience might produce the text (Samuel 2014). As a hallmark of ethnographic research, life history researchers too need to be cognizant of how their own positionality in relation to the topic, the phenomenon, the participants, their context, influence the nature of the data that research participants are likely to produce. For example, Patti Lather in the book '*Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS*' (Lather & Smithies 1997), argues that her role as academic researcher placed her in a particular stance in relation to the HIV+ women whom she was co-researching with a sociologist. The story that is created of the women's lived experiences of living with the disease is a revelation also of the relationship between themselves and the non-infected, the social worker and the academic. Within the tradition of feminist research methodology aiming to uncover power differentials, the truth-making is not about glamour and glory, but about co-sharing of identities, and co-finding of agency.

The representational form that a life history narrative could take is not restricted to only a narrative written lettered text. It may include *artistic and oral* performance. It may be re-presented in the form of a public or private performance amongst intimate partners, or a large audience. Invariably, the choice of a life history research project cannot cover the full sweep of a participant's whole life experiences. It is usually a *contracted form* dedicated to exploring one topical phase, or aspects of one's participants' lives. For example, the choice might be to focus only on the way in which an individual negotiates their personal relationships with authority figures, or the individual's choice of how they negotiate their professional development trajectory, or the specific ways in which home (as opposed to public) life is negotiated and managed. Given that the life history narrative is a *co-construction* between the life historian researcher and the participants, the representational form of the LHR report could take the form of interspersed dialogue between the constructing participants. Many LHR project reports are chosen to be represented in third person narrative to account for the 'omniscient' authorial presence of the reporter of the

narrative, namely the life historian researcher (see Later & Smithies 1997). However, the LHR research might also choose to write the LHR report in a first person narrative account, allowing for greater immediacy of the teller of the tale (i.e. the participant). The latter form (although re-presented in the narrative form by the researcher) is usually authenticated by the research participants through a detailed member check (see Pillay 2003a).

In the act of telling of the life history narrative, one needs to be conscious of *whose biography* is being told: the presence or distance of the LHR researcher and the participants themselves is something to take note of. In autobiographical self-study research (Pithouse-Morgan, Mitchell & Moletsane 2009) the research is activated by the participants themselves. The reason why they consider themselves and their lives worthy of being reported in public domain is worth noting. Usually such persons are individuals who have shaped particular social events socially, politically, memorably. However, it should be noted *when such autobiographies are written* since the timing itself is clue to its belief in its own value and contribution as a social force.

The *ethical considerations* of life history research include some of the following issues. The researcher needs to be conscious of their position of power in relation to the participants in his/ her study. Oftentimes researchers do not provide adequate critical reflection of whether they are ‘giving voice to their participants’, in a hierarchical patronising and condescending interpretation and analysis of their participants’ lived worlds. This is as relevant a set of considerations when one is ‘*researching down*’ (those who do share a lower social rung as oneself as a researcher), as it is when one is ‘*researching up*’ (those who are above one’s one station in the social system). The matter of interpretation when one is ‘*researching across*’ is as relevant since this questions the legitimacy of the researcher choosing to speak on behalf of participants. Does the life history biographer take on new forms of hierarchy when s/he interprets theoretically the world of others? What if the participants do not share this interpretation? Who owns the data analysis of the study? Can participants disagree with the analysis? If so, when and how? The matter of building trust between the research and the researched is thus a crucial element particularly of life history research, but maybe true for all research (interpretivist, constructivist or critical research) agendas.

The table below represents a summary of the argument led in Section One above linking how each of these truth-making operations predispose a

particular goal or focus which can be linked to the paradigmatic epistemological questions. Whilst this table should be seen as an attempt to provide comparability of perspectives, it is accepted that many researchers may choose to *work across and between these paradigmatic perspectives*. Methodological research permutations are thus likely to emerge.

Table 2: Kinds of truth making within life history research

	Kinds of truth	Operations	Goal/Focus	Paradigm
1	Factual Forensic/ Legal Scientific truth	verifiable, can be documented, proved	<i>To establish single account PRODUCT</i>	EMPIRICAL POSITIVIST <i>Truth exists</i>
2	Dialogical social truth	weighing up a range of views through listening, dialoguing...the process of establishing the truth	<i>To focus on how meaning is constructed PROCESS</i>	(SOCIAL) CONSTRUCTIVIST <i>We create truths and are created by them</i>
3	Personal narrative truth	based on the lived subjective experience of the individual, meaning making, giving voice to the voiceless	<i>To acknowledge individual meaning INDIVIDUAL</i>	INTERPRETIVIST Subjectivity <i>We make truths</i>
4	Restorative Healing truth	Focus on what purpose certain 'truths' serve in the wider society	<i>To locate knowing in a broader social context; to reconcile members of the community; INDIVIDUAL</i>	CRITICAL Power & hierarchy Change: bringing about greater justice <i>We can change our truths'</i>

Section Two: Exemplary Studies of Life History within the Field of Education

This section of the paper points to a brief overview of a sampled set of educational research studies using a life history research methodology. The list is by no means exhaustive; instead it aims to be illustrative of the research approach adopting the above framework. It draws on work from a particular institution and therefore embeds the institutional preferences epistemologically and methodologically of this setting.

The first study explores the professional developmental trajectory of the lives of student teachers over different periods of their lives. In particular it focuses the experiences of learning and teaching the English language and their emerging conceptions of what being and becoming a teacher of the language embodies (Samuel 2003). The study emerges as an examination of the complex intersection of personal biographical forces which are drawn from particular homes, schools and patterns of pedagogy within the primary and secondary schooling systems of these selected participants. The study reveals the shifting theoretical influence of alternative theoretical interpretations of language teaching and learning when these student teachers embark on tertiary education in their preparation to become teachers. The study shows how one's biographical force engages in tension with these 'alternative' theoretical views of language acquisition, learning and teaching. Moreover, the study reveals the further pushing and pulling that emerges when students (schooled under the apartheid separate systems) engage with the post-apartheid multi-racial schooling contexts of their professional practicum during training as teachers. The process of professional development is thus an intersection of these forces. The different life histories of nine participants from varied backgrounds reveal how making professional development trajectories entail a personal and situated practice, infused by the macro-, meso- and personal micro-levels of schooling and education.

The second study chooses to explore how particular teachers choose to remain resilient, energetic, committed and creative even in the face of contexts where the majority of their colleagues have given up the hope of positive pedagogy and schooling. The lives of these successful teachers are explored to establish from where they draw these strengths to activate

energised and spirited passionate teaching. The life history researcher here draws on the theoretical conceptions of ‘successful teachers’ who embrace their challenges as opportunities to draw from inner strengths, strengths of personal histories of alienation, affirmation and/or even marginalisation. They become positive through seeking out contexts and pedagogies which extend their own immediate worldviews and restrictive management regimes. These regimes paradoxically become their sources of inspiration (Pillay 2003a). An innovative representational contribution is explored in this study showing how different narrative first or third person voices of the participants yield different levels of insight into the phenomenon.

The common concern of many tertiary education institutions is that its graduates may not be sufficiently embracing the kinds of literacies that are required within the world of everyday work practices. Jacobs (2010) in her study chooses to review the literature on the relationship between academic content and the nature of the language practices of university studies in a range of disciplines: architecture, engineering, teacher education, the legal profession and radiography. She examines the relationship that is established between ‘content lecturers’ (concerned with the disciplinary subject matter) and the ‘language practitioners’ (concerned with the kinds of oral/written assessment discourses required of university study). Many of the content lecturers were also practitioners from the ‘world of work’ who were familiar with the literacy practices (Gee 1990; Boughey 2005) of the everyday workplace. How communication channels between various partnerships of lecturing staff are negotiated is explored in this life history narrative approach. The language practitioner is one who is usually sensitive to the ways in which the languages of different worlds/ domains/ discourse settings are shared. The discourse of the disciplines, their language and literacy practices and that of the work practices are the subject of theorising.

A recent study in Mauritius looks at the manner in which early childhood education teachers choose to remember their own lived experiences of teaching and learning of languages (Ankiah-Gangadeen 2014). Here the life history researcher chooses practitioners from a variety of schooling contexts in the Mauritian setting, each with varied biographical heritages of languages in dialogues with local and global experiences of language learning. The intersection between these multiple levels produces an understanding of the often unarticulated philosophical worldviews of these teachers. Often marginalised as being superficial or a-theoretical, the study

reveals the deeply-held epistemological views of language learning and teaching pedagogues and schooling in general. The impact on their current practices forms the basis of the analysis.

An earlier study (Beecham 2002) chose to research one participant, a student who repeatedly is failing to graduate within the Speech and Hearing Therapy curriculum in her training as a potential therapist. The in-depth study of the student in her final years of study at the university provides an insight into how the curriculum of higher education might be failing the student, how its hidden valuing systems and culturally-loaded expectations of ‘normative practice’ might be reasons why the student fails repeatedly. The study is indirectly a study of the curriculum of the professional training programme.

Pillay (2003b) explores how relations of hierarchy between the powerful therapist in a clinical setting of speech and audiology therapy and their ‘patients’ might be producing conceptions of alienation and marginalisation. The study is a hypothetical exploration of ‘imagined data’ drawing from the researcher’s own lived experiences of being a therapist and a university lecturer of speech and hearing therapy students.

In her study of the lives of people who stutter, Kathard (2003) reveals that the act of documenting the lived experiences of these ‘patients’ could itself become a therapeutic strategy of healing and alternative form of social intervention rather than the traditional medical models used to address the ‘pathology’. The study becomes an explanation of many who stutter who have overcome stuttering in their adult lives. The study therefore, emerges as a potential possibility for therapeutic professional strategies of intervention. By documenting the engagement of the designers of curriculum for occupational therapy across the South African higher educational landscape, Joubert (2007) shows how the personal life histories of her participants have helped shaped the nature of what the discipline of occupational therapy has emerged to be within the South African higher educational landscape. The tension between the importations of worldviews from the westernised traditions of medical history is intersected with the local ‘indigenous’ valuing systems.

Mannah (2009) chose in her study to look at how the agenda of gender is marginalised in the process of the setting up structures within a teacher union. Through telling the lives of women participants who were tasked with the responsibility of inserting gender considerations within the bureaucracy and policies of the executive of the union structures, she is able

to show how paternalistic the organisation was despite the overt rhetoric of equity in public forums. The study resulted in the researcher herself becoming disillusioned with the prospect of gender equity within the union structures and she theorises why the paternalism persists. Her recognition of the union as a ‘bureaucracy’ rather than a force of liberation provided insightful theoretical and philosophical analysis of educational labour forces.

Reid’s (2011) study narrated a fictive account of two participants engaged with the practising to become medical doctors within rural settings. The data is drawn from an intersection between his own personal life historical journey of training and working with students for family and rural medical practice, and his own personal lived experiences of managing a clinical setting within a rural context. His study analyses his own research journal publications on rural medical practice considerations over a number of decades and the kinds of repeated stories from different student doctors during training. His shift in epistemological conceptions of the medical curriculum design spurs him to analyse how two fictive characters, one from an urbanised White racialised background and another from a rural background both experience the challenges and potential of executing rural medical practice. This multiple levelled thesis becomes a means for theorising the curriculum design for training medical doctors for rural practice.

Dhunpath (2010) shifts the emphasis of life history research from its normative focus on the lives of persons. He instead chose to use the methodological approach to develop an insight into the life of an institution. In particular, he focused on the impact of the shifting macro-economic policy environment which redirected resources away from the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) towards centralised governmental sponsored coffers in the early stages of post-apartheid South Africa. Through documenting the lived experiences of the participants in one educational NGO he is able to show how these macro-forces redirect the identity at micro-institutional level. How the NGO survived the withdrawal of support is the subject of the theorising of managing educational and institutional change. The NGO in question was able to forge different directions which provide exemplary potential of how to remain relevant and committed to ‘outside-of-government’ agendas. The study also provides different lens theoretically of how to conduct institutional organisational evaluations.

What is a common thread through all of these studies is the positionality of the researchers in relation to each of the studies. Most of the researchers are themselves higher education professional developers, designers of curriculum or practitioners of the phenomenon they explore. They reflect similarity to or resonance with the kinds of participants whom they study. Mannah (2009) and Joubert (2007) are practitioners like the participants they research: Mannah was herself engaged in the teacher union as an activist for gender considerations; Joubert is a senior curriculum designer of occupational therapy. Reid (2011) is himself a doctor who has worked in rural areas and now a professional trainer of doctors. His positionality is deeply infused into his study. Samuel (2003), Pillay (2003a), Jacobs (2010) and Ankiah-Gangadeen (2014) are professional (teacher) educators or language practitioners concerned about quality of professional development and growth and their studies' focus reflect this interest. Beecham (2002), Pillay (2003b) and Kathard (2003) were all academic members of the professional training when they embarked on their study into speech and hearing therapy curriculum and practices. We study who we are, choosing frames and questions which provide insight not only into the phenomenon we choose, but insights into our own personal implicatedness. The possibility for new directions infuses all of these studies. The researcher may indeed become the researched in the process of the pursuit of the life history research itself.

Concluding Thoughts

The aim of this paper has been to explore the potentialities of life history research as a research methodological approach which is deeply connected with its epistemological locatedness. The paper has aimed to reveal that the choices of the studies that researchers have embarked upon are linked to who they are, what they wish to study, and what contribution to knowledge they wish to make. The characteristics of life history research are that it is a theoretical and philosophical approach aiming to develop epistemological possibilities for operational practice. It is not simply a matter of documenting hero-worshipping or narcissistic reflection. However, in order to be recognised as a trustworthy methodological research approach proponents need to be vigilant of the intersection between the epistemological and methodological considerations. Through the examples shared in the paper the

potential for it to be a valuable contributing research approach is illustrated. Our lives become sources for our theory building. Our participants and our own researcher positionalities are our theoretical resource. Life history research opens up the richness of our lives for such philosophical and theoretical insights.

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