Single mother self-recorded life narratives: a method

Abstract
This paper sets out the context for an innovative social research method for a PhD project on the role of higher education in the life trajectory of disadvantaged single mothers. This new method for producing oral life stories recognises the ontological role of narratives as well the performative effect of social research methods, by capturing the voices of single mothers involved in reflection and sense-making of their lives, in their own time and their own place, using a digital audio recorder. It is anticipated that encouraging autobiographical agency in this way will produce a deeper level of narrative reflection and more intimate accounts of the lives of single mothers as narrators that may not otherwise be achieved with other methods such as the life story interview.

Paper
How might disadvantaged single mothers embody or resist popular stories of single motherhood? What other narratives might inform their identities and make sense of their lives? Might there be a common narrative repertoire available to single mothers and, importantly, how might a higher education increase access to a broader range of ontological narrative possibilities? Here I propose a research method for a PhD project aimed at collecting the life stories of single mothers to determine the role of higher education in the life trajectory of disadvantaged single mothers. The paper describes the rationale for a method that largely removes the researcher from the process of producing life narratives and instead hands over the exercise in story making to participants. Through a brief account of the variations of narrative research I establish the agentic but contingent, ontological nature of life
I then set out a method designed to address concerns about voice, performativity and autobiographical agency, as well as the practical considerations of reaching participants with high life loads. The paper ends with a brief reference to the political underpinnings of the research method. The project seeks to contribute to research in the field of widening participation in higher education by focussing on the experiences of a section of the population of students that are particularly disadvantaged and have received little research interest in the Australian context thus far.

A critical motivation for my PhD project is the desire to open up opportunities for the voices of single mothers to be heard. In theory, in a democracy we all have the right to speak but a right to speak does not equate to an equality in being heard. There are hierarchies of voices, some voices are valued over others and some dismissed (Cavarero 2005). The single mother is an oft maligned category, viewed in the public imagination as an undesirable element and a threat (Adair 2002; Hinton-Smith 2012). Poor single mothers are silenced by a dominant political discourse that positions them as welfare addicted and a welfare drain, while in the popular culture they are welfare cheats, irresponsible mothers, promiscuous and a malignancy in society (Adair 2002). They are also silenced by a lack of resources needed to speak, whether that be a lack of knowing how to speak or to whom, constrained by the burden of survival, or prevented from speaking by personal obstacles (see, for example: ACOSS 2005; Butterworth 2003; Christopher et. al 2002; Crosier et al 2007; McInnes 2002–2003; Walter 2002).

The aim of the research is to make space for yet to be heard (or known) stories of lived experience that will encourage new, alternative or deeper understandings of the social world. Mazzei and Jackson (2012) remind us, however, that conventional approaches that privilege voice assume voice articulates truth of consciousness and experience; that voice data, usually in the form of interview transcripts, has a direct correlation with what is real and true, but there are three problems with this assumption. First, what appears in research documents, usually as interview data that has been rendered into transcripts and provided in chunks for analysis, has become detached from the speaker and devoid of the bodily
expression of the spoken voice, thereby losing important aspect of expression such as tone. Hunt and Samson (2006: 30) explain that tone “is closely bound up with the body. It is the indicator of a bodily self-presence underlying and informing the language we use”. This points us to the common knowledge that how something is said is at least equally important as to what is said. Secondly, an assumption that a speaker “knows who she is, says what she means and means what she says” (MacLure 2009: 104) assumes that there can be “a single, universal, and ahistorical field of representation to reality” (Popkewitz sited in MacLure 2008:104). Humanist approaches may invest too heavily in the representative capacities of the stories their respondents tell and neglect to attend to the social, political and historical contexts in which voices are produced and stories constructed.

Thirdly, a representation of a voice in research, even where we might use respondents’ exact words, as Mazzei and Jackson (2012:746) explain, ignores the ways in which the research process itself, “through unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative agendas and timelines”, already shapes what will be said. Striving to accurately re-produce a tale about personal reality ignores the ways in which story telling is a social exercise, involving the storyteller and an audience: a listener, a reader, a spectator (even where that audience might be the self, such as in the act of writing a diary, or deferred as in the writing of a text that will later be published) and, in Goffmanian terms, the way a story is shaped within the symbolic interaction between them that in turn relies on culturally shaped conventions of storytelling and constructions of self-narratives (Maynes et al. 2008). We need not conclude by all this that voice is not a useful research tool, but that we must disassemble voice as a performative expression of self. MacLure (2008:97) makes the argument that “we need methodologies that are capable of dwelling on, and in, those very properties of voice that make it such troublesome material for research”. We need to attend to the insufficiencies of voice rather than dismiss them or write them off.

The method outlined here works with the notion that the stories people tell are not merely social products but are social actions (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). What is meant here is that rather than view storied texts as little more than items of data of which analysis will be applied to find reality, this approach recognises that the act of storying in and of itself is a social event. Storytelling is about
*doing* and involves questions about the conditions and the motivations for storytelling and what it is that people do with stories (Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Polletta 2012). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) argue that stories are not simply waiting to be told, but are produced by agents who craft stories according to communicative demand, while Polletta (2012: 229) shows that as stories are socially constructed, power plays a role in determining who is allowed to tell stories and who is allowed *not to*, whose stories are deemed credible, and who sets the rules for storytelling and the inequalities in the capacity of people to comply.

Life narratives that are active rather than representational are at the heart of a narrative theory that sees ‘that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world’ through narrativity and that through narratives and narrativity “we constitute our social identities” (Somers and Gibson 1994: 59–9). ‘Ontological narrativity’ (Sommers and Gibson 1994) refers to the enactment of identity: an identity that occurs in narrative rather than a narrative that tells of an identity. Identity is constituted in the process of meaning-making in the stories of our lives, how our life narratives connect with the narratives of others, how we situate ourselves (or are situated) within social, cultural, political, and/or historical narratives, as well as our motivations for the selections we make (Somers and Gibson 1994:60–63). Cavarero (2000: 34) however cautions that the self is not the *product* of the life story but that the self coincides with the “uncontrollable narrative impulse of memory”. While the telling of a life story is not necessary to the existence of self, the narrating of a life story consists of a reification of the self. As Cavarero (2000: 36) puts it, “She becomes, through the story, *that which she already was*”.

The term ‘single mother’ here is used as a category of analysis, referring to mothers who are separated, divorced, or widowed or who have never married, and who have the major responsibility for the care of their child/ren. ‘Single mother’ will be measured by self-definition, and recruitment of participants will be focused on those who self-identify as single mothers at the outset of their studies in higher education. Of interest are single mothers who have attempted or are attempting higher education at a university or in pathways and access programs provided by universities.
The method involves providing research participants with digital recorders, to be retained for a two-week period during which they will use the devices to record themselves telling their life stories. Prior to the recording period a short session will be arranged with each participant to introduce them to the research activity, to provide prompts for reflective thinking, demonstrate how to use the digital recorder, and provide information about support services and the right to withdraw consent.

Interviews will be arranged following the recording period, which will have two main purposes. The first is to provide an opportunity to ask questions related to the purposes of the research that may otherwise be left unanswered in the recordings. The second purpose of the follow-up interviews is to gauge participants’ responses to the experience of narrating their life stories. These responses will in part contribute to an evaluation of the research method with two points of interest. The first is in how effective the method is in producing life stories that ultimately contribute to answering the research questions concerned with narrative identity, agency and subjectivity. The other is concerned with participants’ experience of telling their stories (Frank 2010).

It may seem at odds that on the one hand I argue that story telling is a social exercise but also argue for a method that isolates the story teller. Part of the aim of the method is to allow for intimate story telling free from the formulaic or formal arrangements indicative of interviewing. The sort of storytelling that I am looking for is very personal in form and in process. By designing a method that deinstitutionalises the context as much as possible, I can get as close as possible to the experience of single mothers making sense of their lives and who they are. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009) remind us:

Traditional approaches to interviewing tend to view the interview as a medium that transmits information…The informant or respondent is treated as a repository of answers or stories about his or her inner life and social world. The interview is seen as a means of tapping into that repository. [However] interview results are as actively constructed, collaborative, and situationally mediated as other communicative ventures… (p.37).
Polletta (2012) demonstrates the formative role of institutional contexts on storytelling that govern the norms, sometimes multiple and conflicting, in which stories are told. Social research interviews may not have the same constraints on story telling as the legal system or public policy debates, for example, but it is my contention that an interviewee nonetheless plays the role as one who is being interviewed no matter how skilled the interviewer might be in developing trust and drawing deeply on what might be told. A methodological issue for narrative research is positioning participants as narrators rather than respondents to questions. In response to what Chase (2005:661) sees as the ‘interview society’, interviewees tend to speak in general terms because they assume the researcher is interested in what is general rather than what is specific. Consequently, Chase (2005) sees that the interview may discourage people from telling stories about their lives that are meaningful to them. What I am also trying to achieve is to induce a sense of autobiographical agency—a space in which participants have a greater control over their reflective processes and practices. Over a two week period participants may review, extend, amend and perhaps even delete sections of their stories, which may be a regularised activity or when a thought, idea or memory occurs to them, in their own time and in their own place. In this way participants are encouraged to embrace the role of the narrator and actively involve themselves in story-telling.

A ‘political ontology’ undergirds this research with the idea that social research contributes to shaping reality rather than simply describing the world as it exists, and that given this power, social research can, if inclined, work to enact alternative worlds (Law and Urry 2004). That social research is never disinterested has been well established (Denzin 2000) but Law and Urry (2004: 393) go further in arguing that social research methods are performative: by this they “mean that they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover”. So rather than see respondents or subjects of social research as vessels of data from which to draw in order to capture reality, social research is seen as crafting reality with the people involved in the research activity (Cameron 2011). The research agenda here then is collective and collaborative in nature. To think of research as performative rather than descriptive is to think about methodology not in terms of how best to discover a pre-existing reality, but a methodology that has the potential to help
enact a new or alternative reality. The project aims to make available stories that are yet not know, through a means that places the control over the narrativity in the hands of participants, with the recognition that storying of a life is a social and creative act in meaning-making.

What I have proposed is a creative research method that will work with single mothers in the production of life narratives from the presumption that accounts of lives are self-constitutive acts that draw on broader social narratives. The self-recorded life narrative method will enable the study of narrativity, agency and subjectivity by encouraging a heightened level of participant reflexivity. The method will afford the researcher the ability to connect with the life experiences of single mothers at a deeply personal level as well as offering participants the opportunity to engage in a self-constituting activity that they may find a fortifying experience or even a transformative one. The research aims to find the meaning of higher education in the life trajectories of single mothers through a research approach that is politically performativity in nature.

References


