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Title: The Interrelationship between Researchers’ and Participants’ Embodied Biographies in Higher Education Research.

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Abstract

This paper presents for discussion an experimental methodology which structures, focuses and theorises an embodied form of reflexivity in the analysis of biographical data. Researchers’ embodied lives provide resources for their interpretive practices. Our approach encourages a ‘focus on the process of interpretation’ (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) using three different types of knowledge, which try engage sensory, emotional and intellectual/cognitive resources. We draw upon our Bernsteinian (1990, 2000) theoretical framework to explore how our embodied biographies intertwine with those of research participants through our interpretations. Our argument is that this form of critical reflection (Morley, 2008) marshals our embodied resources and enables us to understand better the lives and educational experiences of students in our research. The insight afforded by critical reflection can generate significant and important findings from our data.

Key words: embodiment; knowing differently; theorisation; critical reflection.

1. Introduction

In this paper we demonstrate a methodological approach drawn from the field of artistic methods which facilitates critical reflection (Morley, 2008) and an embodied form of engagement with students’ biographical data. The method encouraged us to draw upon and access embodied experiences which resonate with the biographical data by enrolling different forms of knowing (Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008b). The data reflected upon was generated using a life-grid methodology (Webster et al., 2004, Parry et al., 1999, Wilson et al., 2007) and three interviews (one conducted each year for three consecutive years) which aimed to develop an understanding of students’ perceptions and experiences of university education and to explore the ways that these were shaped by their previous life experience. Two of thirty-one case study students were chosen as an initial exercise in the methodology.

The research drawn upon here was conducted as part of a three-year multi-method UK based project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant Number: RES-062-23-1438] designed to explore critically the relationship between the quality of university education and social inequality. We are investigating whether the sociology-related social science undergraduate education received by students in university
departments with different league table rankings is as divergent as their reputations suggest. We are aiming to develop socially just ways of conveying differences in undergraduate education on the basis that league tables, the most widely used representation of differences, exacerbate existing inequalities. Currently in the UK, more wealthy students tend to go to more affluent and prestigious universities (which are given additional kudos by league tables) and they generally leave with greater advantages in the job market (Lemaitre, 2002; Abbas and McLean, 2007, 2010; Smith, 2010; Ashwin et al., 2012). This inequity is a problem which has national and global implications (Abbas and McLean, 2010).

Currently, in our critical analysis we are drawing upon and developing the theoretical framework provided by the sociologist Basil Bernstein (1990, 2000) which has been extensively used in schools and to a lesser extent in Higher Education (e.g.’s Abbas and McLean, 2007, 2010; Ashwin, 2009; Muller, 2004, Maton, 2006). We have collected and analysed a range of data sets from four universities which we have called Prestige, Selective, Diversity and Community to reflect their reputation. The departments from Prestige and Selective are regularly rated in the top third of all the major UK league tables and Diversity and Community in the bottom third. The data sets include: 98 biographical interviews with first years; 31 case studies of students; a survey of over 750 students; videos of teaching from each year (12 sessions); student work from each year; curriculum and institutional documents and statistics; and, interviews with university staff (16). Having a disciplinary focus was important because we wanted to understand the role of knowledge in what students’ gain from university. Biographical data is central to our project because the quality of education cannot be understood without insight into how students’ backgrounds interact with their experience of university education in different institutional settings (West, 1996).

Many researchers have commented on the value of maximising the use of the senses in social research. For example, Mason and Davies (2009) suggest greater use of the senses will transform ontology (what is considered to be ‘real’ ‘there’ to research or to know about) and its epistemology (how it can be known). The senses are part of human life and of the experience of what Ingold calls ‘involvement in the world’ (2000, 258). The method presented here illustrates the use of embodied resources.

Our efforts rewarded us with greater insight into the student data than had already been gained using thematic analysis, engaging with the data through analysing the transcripts and in trying to working holistically with cases by writing synopsis. The exercise suggested different directions for further analysis and the findings. In particular, insights were generated by exploring the utility of the theoretical framework we are using in the project by trying to gain insights into the ‘classifications’ (Bernstein, 2000) we and the students embody. We also considered the implications of what we have found through this exercise for the ‘framing’ (ibid) of sociologically based social science knowledge and student support at university. The tactic of theorising our perceptions and the participants data using the same theoretical framework helps to position researchers and participants as part of the same world: positioning us as researchers from within higher education rather than misleadingly conceptualising ourselves as objective outsiders (Trahar, 2009).

Our methodology incorporates a view of reflexivity which acknowledges the fact that knowledge, biography and experiences are embodied phenomena which include the
corporeal, the sensory and the emotional (O'Neill, 2008). These phenomena are the resources that researchers use to understand and interpret data rather than obstacles to knowledge which must be overcome. The notion that there are different ‘ways of knowing’ (Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008a, Heron and Reason, 1997) has been developed more thoroughly within artistic methods: both by artists seeking to conduct research and by social scientists who endeavour to use and develop artistic methods (Gergen and Jones, 2008); (Leavy, 2009). These have drawn upon Heron and Reason’s (1997) four different forms of knowledge: propositional knowledge is that which is normally used in academic research involving conceptual and abstract thinking; experiential knowledge is that which is felt and is gained through experience; presentational knowing represents experience in symbolised forms like creative writing, drawing etc.; and, practical knowing which is ‘how to’ knowing that which is achieved by doing. These forms of knowledge which can be drawn upon as part of a reflexive process are used here to extend our personal interpretive resources. Using this methodology we have developed a complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between sociological knowledge and social class and have been able to raise questions about how university students may need supporting. We speculate that embodied and less abstract engagements will increase the usefulness of our data and give us important insights into the strengths and limitations of Bernstein’s concepts.

2. Embodied Research and Reflexivity

So far, we have conducted a thematic analysis of all the student interview data in NVivo, and we have coded our life grid data as well as keeping whole grids accessible via NVivo. We have worked hard to stop our methods from fragmenting the students in our project. We constantly return to the life-grids in our interpretations of interview data. Each student’s material is linked as a case in NVivo so it is easy to go back to the whole case. We have also written a synopsis of all case-study students which provide a summary of their lives as represented in the grid and interviews.

As part of our reflexive approach to the development of knowledge from the project we have actively engaged with participants and other interested groups throughout and have sought views on our data and our findings. We have tried to use feedback and reactions to inform the process of knowledge creation. For example, student participants have been given the opportunity to comment on their life grids, we have re-explored issues when interviewing case study interviews and have discussed our interpretation of data with a range of student and staff audiences. However, as researchers we are key resources for interpreting our biographical data.

For some time now it has been suggested that higher education researchers should together engage in a critical reflexivity and be more explicit about the way their own biases, the context and theory shape their research and its findings (Sheay et al., 2009). We developed our methodology which stimulates an embodied approach to reflexivity because we feel that purely cognitive based reflection encourages a simplified rationalization and we wanted to explore the complex factors which interact with the research process and profoundly influence it in a variety of ways (Law, 2004).

3. Bernstein’s Theory and Reflexive Practice
Bernstein’s (2000) key theoretical concept of code helps to theorise our own knowledge development as a process in which we are integral. Code orientates individuals and groups to particular meanings; to producing particular ‘realisations’ of these meanings; and to particular ‘interactional practices’ (2000, 186). Bernstein claimed that we now live in a totally pedagogised society (Bonal and Rambla, 2003) and that codes are learned in different official forums like schools and in unofficial forums like through the media. The mechanism by which code is produced is through interactional practices [and consciousness, so this would include internal dialogue] according to different principles of power and control. Codes are therefore ubiquitous and they regulate dispositions and identities through official and local pedagogising agencies (Bernstein, 1990). In regulating consciousness, codes shape what we conceptualise and act upon as possible and impossible. An relevant example of how code might be relayed is the terms used for some universities—“top”, ‘elite’ ‘post-1992’ - all such terms have meanings which orientate agents (institutions, their students and their staff) towards hierarchies, actions, possibilities and impossibilities.

Codes are given by the relationship between classification (which refers to power) and framing (which refers to control) (Bernstein, 2000). Classification refers to relations between categories (agents, agencies, discourses, practices) in terms of how strongly insulated they are from each other: the stronger the insulation, or the clearer the boundary, the more space there is for the development of ‘specialised’ identities (for example, possessing and not possessing a university degree can be seen as a strong boundary). So in the UK, ‘post-92’ (lower status) is understood in relation to pre-1992 (higher status). Classification can occur at any level, that is, between or within categories. Framing is evident within categories. It refers to the relationships inherent within activities and the way that they sustain particular divisions of labour and relays principles of control. In an educational setting it refers to ‘the relations of transmission and acquisition between teacher and taught’ (ibid. p. 99). Formal teaching settings (seminars and lectures), student support, assessment modes have framings which varies the control that students and university teachers have. Classifications and the codes they produce are important to researchers because in Bernstein’s view they shape what we see, how we see things and our possibilities for future action.

Bernstein might not seem relevant to this reflexive enterprise because, in his own words theoretical categorisations often have him “pinned down as a structuralist with strong Durkheimian roots” (2000. p. 92), however he claimed that although “codes”, relay “ordering principles and their related practices” that reproduce culture and hierarchy they also open “up a space for the potential of their change.” So “inherent in codes is a choice about itself (ibid. p.92)” In identifying a choice Bernstein is advocating a non-deterministic theory, which like the world he is describing is part of an ongoing process that continuously requires modification in conjunction with the research field and research findings.


As we have just completed the funded period of our research our analysis to date has focused on policy-related findings from across our data sets. Our data challenges the national higher education league tables’ notion of the quality of sociology-related social science teaching. We have drawn upon Bernstein (1990, 2000) to conceptualise the way
that students who engage gain access to pedagogic rights and a ‘specialized pedagogic identity’ which is valued by students in all of our universities. We have argued that academic knowledge is central to their gaining access to this identity and to pedagogic rights and that access to these is facilitated by good teaching, which takes place in all four universities, but contrary to what might be expected on the basis if reputation is more present in the lower status universities.

Working with a clearly defined set of resources we opted to develop and use a life-grid methodology (Parry et al., 1999, Wilson et al., 2007, Webster et al., 2004) to collect biographical data immediately prior to the first interview we did with students. This involved asking students to tell us key events and experiences in relation to education, family, housing, leisure, parents employment, friends and significant relationships, health, own employment and health in pre-specified periods of their lives up until they went to university. We recorded summaries in the life grids that were then checked with the students and revisited each subsequent year. Now we wish to use the biographical data combined with the recorded and transcribed interviews to develop a more in depth understanding of the impact of students’ biographies on their experience of higher education and to draw out the implications of this for academics, universities, students and policy makers.

5. The Methodology and its Application

5.1 The Methodology

The case studies we have reflected upon are those of two female working-class students attending Diversity: Leanne and Lucia. The following overarching question guided our reflections: How is my past experience impacting upon how I see this person (identifying factors from my background, my education and/or my professional practice)? In order to make our reflections manageable we directed ourselves to focus on one or two key aspects of our experience. We also explored the following questions: What classifications am I using in my understanding of this person’s life and experience of education? How does my sense of what the project can achieve practically/politically impact upon how I understand these students? How do I see the interrelationships between my answers to the previous questions?

To foster embodied engagement with these questions we drew upon Seeley and Reasons’s (2008) conceptualization of performative knowledge and paid attention to sensual knowing by being aware of aesthetic, bodily and emotional responses. For example, we noted the feelings the students biographies stimulated and we tried to suspend the need to rush to quick rationalised or intellectualised explanations taking time to let our thoughts and feelings emerge and making concerted efforts not to intellectualise. Each of us did this in our own way: quietly contemplating the students' biographical data or engaging in exercises designed to increase awareness. We tried to remain open to whatever response comes from the former processes (Sealey and Reason (ibid) call this ‘body forthing’). For example, Andrea began by paying attention to feelings such as tension in the stomach and then allowed the relationship between her past and the student data to emerge from this. We took what we have learned from these processes and developed from them (being informed in Sealey and Reason’s (ibid) terms). These ideas have been developed within artistic methodologies to help researchers allow the embodied aspects of their being to
interact with the data and express its knowledge. As Leavy (2009) notes, these methods have significant overlap with what many qualitative social scientists do anyway, but defining such an approach as a method helps to evaluate the strengths and limitations of what we are doing.

5.2 Leanne and Lucia

Leanne and Lucia were chosen because they overlap and contrast in important ways. They are both female working-class students who attend Diversity yet their life experiences are very different. We categorized all the students as having high, low and medium amounts of turbulence in their lives as a whole across a number of dimensions (education, housing, family and health). Leanne was nineteen when we first met her and she lived at home with her parents during her degree. She is an only child and her account of her life suggests she has low turbulence across most of these areas. We classified her as having medium turbulence in education because she experienced bullying (although she described it in quite a dismissive way). Lucia who is a mature student of around 40 was classified as having high levels of turbulence across all of these areas. This was because: her family treated her badly and one of her parents had died when she was very young; her education had been disrupted by her being sent to relatives in another country against her wishes; she had ongoing court cases; she suffers from a learning disability; she has financial problems; and, difficulties with one of her children involve her in regular battles with the social, health and education authorities. Both students appeared to be engaging well with the sociological knowledge they were encountering but Lucia’s problems (with her child, the court cases and poverty) hindered her progress. By the end of the project she was going part-time to finish her degree, nonetheless, she defined her experience as positive and felt well-supported by her tutors.

Prior to this reading the first year transcripts and life grids had made us aware that students with difficult lives seemed to engage with sociological knowledge particularly effectively through attempting to understand their own lives and those of others. This finding was supported by the survey data which indicated that the mature students in our sample were more likely to take a ‘deep approach to learning’. However, Lucia’s marks went up and down depending on what was going on in her life. Leanne seemed quite an ideal student. She describes herself as a successful university student. She presented as academically committed and confident. She had a good understanding of sociological theory, ‘better than others around her’ and did voluntary work. She was set to get a 2:1 (a good mark in the UK system).

5.3 What we have learned about the students.

5.3.1 Leanne

Our methodology was particularly useful for drawing out Leanne’s story because she was difficult to ‘see’ with a surface reading of her data. Each of us commented on this in our reflections. Andrea felt that this might be because her background overlapped with Leanne’s in significant ways. Their fathers had the same job, an ‘ordinary white working class upbringing’, both had been bullied a bit at school and they both had relationships with their fathers which involved debate. Paul felt he initially couldn’t see Leanne because although on the surface she appeared to be saying she had special abilities and that she was confident that she was better than others he felt that at some level her narrative about her
life in the interviews and transcripts responded to the question of ‘what was ordinary about
her’. Our deeper reflections bought different aspects of her into vision. Paul drew upon his
professional background, accessing more about Leanne by contrasting and comparing her
with Oxford University students who he had interviewed previously and always presented
themselves and their achievements as special and significant (particularly if they were
white, male and middle-class). Students he taught in a Further Education College in East
London would have presented their stories more similarly to Leanne. He noted that her
significant sociological insights and her impressive commitment to voluntary work were
‘made ordinary’ when they were important details that were easy to miss. Andrea’s deeper
reflections also focused on Leanne’s tendency of minimising herself through her self-
representation. She relates to this emotional strategy of playing down achievements.
Andrea sees this as a White British working-class style (being considered big headed if she
talked about her own academic successes when younger and in danger of being bullied for
bragging). Paul and Andrea also think this may also be a gendered representation. As
discussed below these elements of self-representation are important when considering
what universities can help students to do.

Monica hones in on Leanne an as an only child. On a personal level Monica feels sorry for
her lack of siblings yet, simultaneously envious of the attention of the only child. Monica
shared attention with two siblings by the age of three and vied for her mother’s attention..
This chain of thought was stimulated by paying attention to embodied emotion and made
her wonder whether the additional resources that parents of limited income would be able
to put into Leanne (as an only child) had been significant in her going to university ‘against
the odds’. She knows from academic reading that only children tend to be better at
academic work. None of Leanne’s friends had gone to university, so she was unusual.
Monica thinks a range of factors conspire to make Leanne successful (e.g. being identified
early on as being good at school work) but also laments that she has not been supported to
make even more progress at university. Monica has supported her own children and her
students to improve from Leanne’s position (a very good 2:1 student in the first year) to
achieving first class marks and she is sure that this could have been the case for Leanne with
the right support.

All three of us were frustrated at Leanne’s tendency to see her own abilities as something
mystical. Andrea began with jealousy and anger at her view of her ‘special gifts’ chasing the
emotions back to her childhood but then as with Monica and Paul eventually arriving at a
point where she felt this ‘mysticism’ was counterproductive in terms of preventing her from
aiming for systematic improvement.

5.1.2. Lucia

All three of us were deeply moved by Lucia’s account of her life. We all felt angry on her
behalf at the poverty and difficulty of her life and at the way that multiple problems and
hardships had built up for her. Between us we seem to feel overwhelmed and in awe of her
achievements despite the difficulties. We each comment on the gap between our own lives
and the extreme trouble of her life. As mothers, Andrea and Monica both relate to her
constant worry about her child but our children do not have the severe difficulties of Lucia’s
child and have significantly more resources to draw upon. Andrea has also had periods of
financial hardship whilst studying and looking after children in this context, and relates to
some of the complexity in her families emotional life. However, her own circumstances
were much easier. Monica’s efforts lead her to reflect on how Lucia managed to hold onto her desire to become educated even though her undiagnosed learning disability and life events generally appeared to marshal against the likelihood of Lucia ever going to university.

Monica sees Lucia as fortunate to be at Diversity and notes that for Lucia being respected by her tutors (they think she is capable of doing a degree) is important for her, as is the fact that tutors drew attention to the fact that their biographies overlap with hers to encourage her: they were mature students. Monica keeps personal information to herself as a tutor and does not seek personal information from students. She likes to meet on pedagogical ground without ‘baggage’. She now wonders how much and what kind of ‘disclosure’ is helpful- in particular for students like Lucia.

Andrea recognises Lucia as a time-consuming student who does not so much seek academic help from her tutors (she sometimes has a conversation about written feedback but this is not her main focus in the interview) but rather needs confidence and motivation boosting. She reflects upon how chance meetings and connections between students and tutors often underpin this type of support (e.g. Housee and Richards, 2011). She is anxious about how productive relationships are created (and unproductive ones avoided and how to judge the difference) and wonders how many students are missed.

All three of us express positive feelings about Lucia’s personal engagement with academic knowledge. In contrast with Leanne who always demonstrates her sociological knowledge in relation to others, Lucia’s sociological knowledge is talked about in terms of it enlightening her regarding her own life and its help to her in dealing with the authorities. For example, she refers to her research into academic papers in order to interpret what social workers and doctors are saying to her or in challenging decisions. However, Paul feels immense discomfort with Lucia’s intense focus on the personal in her discussion of academic knowledge. He thinks for sociological knowledge to be powerful it needs to be applied to the lives of others also. He can see that Lucia is applying her knowledge in trying to help other mothers in similar circumstances through an organization she is involved with, but is still concerned that this focus might be restrictive. Andrea also has anxieties because she is worried about her acceptance that Lucia’s new found knowledge is being used for the good of her son. We only have her word for it and her brother disagrees with her. Both Andrea and Paul refer back to the transcripts to look for evidence that all is well. These emotions encourage us to engage with alternative interpretations and to raise issues that might otherwise be missed.

5.2 Classifications and Framings: Lessons for and from our Bernsteinian Theoretical framework.

This section briefly describes areas identified through the exercise which need exploring further because they might have implications for perpetuating or challenging inequality in terms of how social class codes are relayed through classifications and framings and the roles that universities play. We are limited by space to two examples.

Class was central to how we classified and interpreted the two students through our biographical experience. Paul’s differentiation between University of Oxford and Newham College of Further Education in East London students allowed him to identify and relate
Leanne’s and Lucia’s representations of themselves to previously encountered class-based ways of self-representation. Andrea’s identification with Leanne’s emotional style is on the basis of her feeling that this specific emotional style might be class based and Monica understanding of Leanne’s lack of support for her academic work is based on her supporting her own children and direct experience of the advantage this gives them. Whilst interpretations stimulated by our embodied past might not be considered sufficient evidence upon which to start interrogating Bernstein’s conceptual framework, put together with the other forms of evidence we have gathered they open up avenues of questioning and suggest ways in which we may develop.

Bernstein (2000) suggests that relationships with knowledge are class based and emphasises the power of specific forms of knowledge in generating class-based hierarchies. However, despite a shared class background Lucia and Leanne relate to and classify the same sociological knowledge in very different ways. Through Lucia’s personal engagement with sociological knowledge she classifies it as being powerful for herself and others like her. She positions herself and her family as oppressed people that can benefit from its application. Leanne’s relationship with knowledge (classified as something to understand others with) is usually seen by teachers as more typical of middle-class students (McLean and Abbas, 2009). The research team are conflicted over Lucia’s very intense personal engagement with knowledge: Paul wonders if she can fully benefit if she only engages in this way and Andrea wonders whether the consequences of Lucia’s application of her new found knowledge and skills on behalf of her child will turn out to be for the best. We cannot know this from the transcript.

These subjective, embodied and emotional engagements provide indicators as to how we might begin elaborating within-class relationships to and classifications of knowledge emerging from students’ very different biographical representations (turbulent and less turbulent). A more complex understanding of the relationship between class and knowledge could lead to new ways of understanding students’ engagement with sociological knowledge. Our research suggests that ideally students should engage with sociological knowledge and be able to see its personal relevance and gain insight into the lives of others and from this see new possibilities for the future both for themselves, for others and for society (McLean et al., 2012). The partial engagement of these two students suggests that it would be useful if pedagogical framings could be developed which support both types of engagement for students with different biographies would be useful.

Another set of within-class classifications warranting further enquiry relate to student support. On the surface it seems that Lucia requires a lot of support for her personal difficulties and Leanne is doing well with standard provision. These are two easily recognisable classifications of students from our professional lives: Lucia’s is the problem ridden ‘non-traditional student’ and, despite her class background, Leanne conforms to a middle-class norm and doesn’t appear to need additional support. Our reflections complicate this classification in several ways. First it may be important to understand that not all students (or people) know when they could gain by seeking support. Whilst Leanne classifies herself as someone who is doing well, she will not seek academic support, yet we discerned under-achievement. In terms of framing there is a question about whether universities and departments should be doing more to help students identify how different forms of support might help them. There is also a question about whether Leanne’s
apparent lack of understanding or interest in getting additional academic support is typical of class (and/or gender) groupings. If she were typical of a group then not seeking support is an informal process that contributes to systematic bias, if it is an individual phenomenon then there may be many more like her who might need help in identifying what they can gain from additional support. There is also an issue of whether existing beliefs (for example, Leanne seeing academic skills and knowledges as being ‘given’ rather than something that she can acquire) are a barrier to seeking support (Blackwell et al., 2007). It is a common misperception that academic ability is largely innate. In addition there are questions about whether students who represent themselves as ‘ordinary’ are best served by this view. Again if this is a class (or structural) phenomena can universities practices ameliorate the situation?

6. Conclusions

These focused reflections are based upon an artistically-based embodied methodology. They have a) improved our understanding of the complexity of the classifications that are embedded in students embodied biographical accounts and these have lead us to new questions about Bernstein’s framework and the nature of the effects of social class; b) showed the importance of our own biographical past to our own and the students’ classificatory and interpretive processes; and, c) enabled us to propose ways for drawing upon these complex classificatory processes to think about support for students within higher education.

References


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i Classification and Framing are explained below.

ii Although our reflections suggest that Leanne tends to minimize things that have happened to her.