

Biographical Interpretive Narrative Methods in Action: Understanding the 'Truth' within Lone Parent Experiences of Austerity and Community Action

Luke Campbell

This paper, prepared for the ESREA Life History and Biography Network conference (February 2020), works to establish how notions of 'truth' may be understood within the experiences of those enduring the most severe impacts of contemporary Conservative-led austerity in the UK. Taking the author's researched community of lone parent families as its focus, the paper endeavours to shift towards identifying a form of research practice centred on truth that takes the individual's experience of a given socio-political phenomenon (austerity) as authentic and valid (Ross and Moore, 2016) in shaping their lived experience and drive towards social activism. Within the chosen research method Biographical Interpretive Narrative Methods (BINM), the experiences of the respondents are taken as their truth, regardless of whether elements within their narrative conflict or contradict official statements and guideline issues by organisations such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Job Centres, food banks (see e.g. Edinburgh Food Project, 2016; and UK Government, 2017), etc. Truth, therefore, stems from the individual, and thus their experience, insight, hardship, and responses are taken as the true impact and 'misery' of austerity (Alston, 2018) rather than reports from the UK Government (e.g. Conservative Party, 2018; or Shorthouse and Kirkby, 2014) which may temper or homogenise the experiences of those whom former UK Prime Minister Theresa May once termed 'the just managing' and others whose lives are lived outside government expectations.

Building from the author's ongoing PhD research, this paper offers a deeply contextualised account of how BINM - deployed in a Freirean-inspired dialogical approach - works in practice to identify truth within activism in a north Edinburgh community identified as falling within the lower 5%, 10% and 20% for multiple deprivation in Scotland (SIMD 2016). Consequently, the article addresses concerns regarding positionality and reflexivity within such a hyperlocalised context - including the impact of personal, professional, and academic relationships hold between researcher and participants, as well as the implications of being a local social activist undertaking research in one's own community. This is supported through a brief community profile of the concerned community based on a five-fold approach informed by Christakolpou et al. (2001) and Campbell (forthcoming) which works to understand communities from social, political, economic, transport, and artistic lenses. From there, the struggles of families and peer activist networks are examined via the responses to date of participants' struggles towards a better life than the one currently lived. Operating to a thematic discussion point of the lived experiences of lone parent families during these socially and economically 'hard times' - though also concerned with social and support networks, political activism, and parenthood as a transformational experiences.

Although BINM constitutes the primary research method within the PhD, several other approaches have informed or influenced the selected approach - among them, Neutralisation Theory and Retrospect Bias. Each of these approaches have been utilised within a diverse range of fields beyond adult education and community development; 'neutralization theory', for example, as advanced by Sykes and Matza (1957) and Wortley (1986) is far more common within criminology yet is equally applicable to broader research given that particular choices and behaviours (both socially and non-socially acceptable) are rationalised by the interviewee. This theoretical framework suggests that 'deviants' (in this instance the lone parent interviewees) depart from expected social or behavioural norms as depicted by society or their immediate social groups (see e.g. Cohen, 1955; Copes and Williams, 2007; Sykes and Matza, 1957; Velarde, 1978; Sutherland and Cressey, 1974). Retrospective bias therefore ties in closely to this given that the emotional distance participants experience from many aspects of the interview topics may foster a bias or divergent view from any suggested 'authentic' sensation as experience at the time - e.g. conflicts with a former partner, rationalising parenting choices, etc.

Question(s) from the call your abstract most closely responds to?:

- In neoliberal times, is narrative research a source of activism in its own right?
- What can different lenses of gender, sexuality, culture and politics bring to our research?

It is therefore hoped that this conference will offer opportunities to (a) engage with the core questions identified above in relation to the participant narratives of activism, struggle, and parenthood; (b) provide learning opportunities for the researcher and other interested parties to share in their past research practices and the authenticity of presenting others' stories; and (c) to establish a relational framework that is sensitive to the researcher-participant relationship.

Key Words: Activism, Austerity,, Community, Lone Parenthood, Narrative Research