

'Come talk to me, you can see what's going on'. Biography research, the good and the beautiful, and looking for change.

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Paper

The Call says quite starkly "ultimately, we are asking if a life history and biography approach can help in the struggle for what is good and beautiful." In response, we – two very different individuals, by gender, age, 'race', formation and positionality - intend to share and merge our approaches to biography and life history work.

Part of our exploration will be the juxtaposition of our skin language - symbiotic as colleagues, friends, and researchers within a shared community against our personal identities, which beget a political language, unique to our lived realities and how others “read” our skin.

One of us proposes *autoethnography* as the method we should employ to advance a truly emancipatory agenda. The language of the skin can only be told by the individual in the skin. The question of race is far more complex for her: we cannot only be defined by our race when we embody other marginalized identities. Race in conjunction with other salient identities, may provide the subtext for the language of the skin. There are intersections in our very being. For example, she is Black, most specifically African-American, a woman, a community activist, whose experiences are also informed by having lived abroad. And she is presenting her language as all of these things in a European space.

The other, male, white, northern European, relies on language-grounded biographical narratives collected among activists involved with fragile populations in European communities, particularly immigrant and refugee populations confronted with the whole impact of racism and exclusion, examined for their ability to reveal spaces of change, transformation, agency.

The self and the Other encounter one another in ways that are not necessarily equal, empathetic, or harmonious. The interaction of the research encounter determines how meaning-making takes place, and how group belonging, ethnic or cultural discourses, as well as gender, age, professional and educational relationships emerge and are formed in our communication. Empathy, understanding, solidarity, care for the wellbeing of the other are all crucial elements of this form of qualitative, co-constructed dialogical interaction. Activism – the will to bring about change, change for the better, a form of beauty in a world requiring urgent improvement, need and feed on all of these qualities, and more.

As in our research and our lives, in this joint paper we wish to consider the contribution of life history and biography research to the lived experience of 'race', gender, age, and the possibilities it offers for developing activism. Moreover, to assert ourselves in this engagement as we authentically are in both our collegial relationship and personal friendship- our differences notwithstanding, is a political act. Yet, to engage these themes with the vulnerabilities that such explorations insist from one another, also make it a courageous one. Our dialogue across our research allows us to access traditional canons of knowledge while we simultaneously subvert those canons in our attempt to excavate a lexicon that embodies both languages of the skin- starkly contrasted but naked and transparent in their truth.

Question: Can a life history and biography approach help in the struggle for what is good and beautiful?

Keywords: Activism, race, gender, autoethnography, biographical narrative

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