Extended Abstract

Biography as a methodology teaches us about life and human behaviour; it can help us to understand individual motives, personality, the people and conditions that influenced an individual in a way that brings their life and work to life. ‘Biography adds flesh to the bones of achievement; it adds human form to the spirit of ideas and emotions’ (Jones, 1998 p. 161). Accordingly, biographical approaches create an opportunity for those interested in studying the lived experience of leadership learning and development processes. This is important because leadership learning has been shown to be overwhelming naturalistic, predominantly occurring through everyday lived experience (Kempster, 2009).

As a methodology biography can involve a wide range of data collection methods and analytical approaches. Drawing on the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2005; 652) a brief précis of terms used in the literature illustrates many interchangeable expressions. First, these include the phrase narrative - meaning an oral or written account acquired through fieldwork, interview or naturally occurring conversation; the second term, life history, generally describes extensive autobiographical narrative this may be collected in oral or written form; third, life story refers to the autobiographical story in the person’s own words – although life history and life story are often used interchangeably, what is more, some researchers prefer to use the term personal narrative instead of life story; however, the term personal narrative can also refer to a wide range of additional written artefacts as well as autobiographical stories. For historians, oral history describes interviews that focus on the meanings historical events hold for individuals who lived through them. The examination of primary or secondary sources of data may involve the study of artefacts, such as diaries, letters, interviews,
biographical notes and other sources, and is most commonly associated with the study of ‘distinctive’ individuals (Jones, 1998). For the purposes of this paper, biography involving the examination of narrative undertaken during interviews covering the totality of a person’s life is discussed, as opposed to the examination of historical artefacts, as this is primarily associated with research concerning influential historical figures.

Whilst there are a number of distinctive differences in the methodological approaches outlined and, of course, there are many different analytical approaches, by paying attention to the narrative in respondent’s accounts they share some common ground. Notably, researchers’ of this creed typically share an interest in people’s lived experience. They have an appreciation of the temporal nature of experience, process and change over time and in the self and representations of the self. Frequently, there is a desire to empower participants so that the respondent contributes to determining the most salient themes to emerge for discussion. Additionally, biographical researchers’ are generally aware that they are also a narrator in the process (Elliot, 2005: 6). Fundamentally, the presence of the researcher during the storytelling makes them a ‘co author’ of the story (Chamberlayne et al, 2004: 183).

Elliot (2005) notes narrative identities are a product of interaction between cultural discourses that frame the narrative structure, and the material circumstances and experiences of the individual, thereby tapping into aspects of experience difficult to elicit through other means. An individual’s story unfolds within the framework of personally constructed genres, generated through the established repetition of their story, shaped to conform to the expectations of the audience. This process is learnt over time. The different ways in which ‘narrative frameworks’ are maintained may be more or less restrictive as determined by cultural texts and shared experiences in which they are formed. For Chamberlayne (2004), biographical approaches enable us to study social reality and see it continuously reinterpreted by social actors, and as a result it possible to describe how individuals give meaning to their experiences (ibid, 189).

In the field of leadership studies, Kuhnert and Russell (1990) explain that biographical data can illuminate the development processes involved in life events related to the matter of research interest. Proposing a strategy for the integration of biographical data with constructive/ developmental theory, the authors argue that it is possible learn about a leader’s personal characteristics and behaviours or their underlying values, attitudes, motivation,
believes and environmental contexts. Arguably raising the profile and potential of biography as a methodology, Kempster and Parry (2004) drew on Kuhnert and Russell’s (1990) approach to tackle the problem of identifying a method for eliciting tacit knowledge of ‘how’ an individual has developed and provide an explanation of managerial leadership learning through lived experience. By learning about important and meaningful life experiences and their outcomes, rich insights can be gained into the importance of lived experience to leadership development (Kempster and Parry, 2004). Additionally, this can lead to a greater understanding of the meaning that leaders derive from their life experiences, thereby adding support to life course theory discussed elsewhere in the literature (Rouse and Jayawarna (2010).

However, as a methodology, biography is not without its critics. Although Howe (1982) suggests biographical data can draw out a person’s uniqueness and provide insights into individual human development that can help to elucidate the relationship between earlier experience and later achievements, the author cautions that this should not replace traditional sources of knowledge obtained from ‘empirical research’ (p 1073), and in so doing reveals prejudices that serve to undermine biographical research and qualitative approaches in general. Countering this proposition Newton (1995) explains biography is a naturalistic form of empirical research and a rich source of ideas about the development of the individual across the life span. Although critics elsewhere sometimes claim biography is voyeuristic, invasionary, exploitative and obsolete, Fillis (2006) argues that it is equal to more traditional approaches can tap into the intangible nature of creativity, whilst also introducing creativity and imagination into the research process.

Creativity is also a feature of this paper and a proposal for a novel approach to the traditional conference format. It follows Reinmann (2003) who describes his experiences of participating in a joint venture to make the process of ‘finding the findings’ in biographic narrative visible. Deviating from the traditional format of a conference session, a biographical transcript was distributed so that it became the matter of open discussion. Although this transcript originated from a very different discipline - a sociological study of the experiences of migrant Turkish woman living in Germany, it brings to light some interesting possibilities for the present conference and for exploring and understanding the potential of biography in the discipline of leadership studies.
Following Reimann’s (2003) approach, it is proposed here that this paper will be accompanied by a transcript of a biographical research interview undertaken as part of a study into entrepreneurial leadership learning and development. Readers will be invited to contribute their own pieces of analysis and interpretations of the narrative, and thereby contribute to the ethos of the conference to loosen up rigidity and encourage as much intellectual dialogue, debate, and exchange as possible.

References


Please send extended abstracts (approximately 1000-1500 words) attached as a pdf (or doc/docx) file to islc-proposals@cbs.dk by September 1, 2014. Early submissions, received before July 15th, will have a response by August 15th.