Questioning the Subject in Biographical Interviewing

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Abstract

This paper considers how different approaches to interviewing and styles of questioning produce different sorts of biographical subjects and accounts. It compares styles of biographical interview (chronological and narrative) and types of question (narrative and explanatory), and presents an approach, which treats the interview as a collaborative co-production primarily concerned with the present and subjectivity, rather than the past and fact. It also considers how biographical interviewing may direct and contain narratives of the self through the subject positions it creates and offers interviewees. Discussion is grounded in reflection on a recent project involving university students in interviewing young people leaving care about their care experiences and making a training video for professionals. The paper highlights the inter-subjective and emotional aspects of interviewing in this context.

Introduction

1.1 This paper is primarily concerned with spoken autobiography and the conduct of interviews in life history research. It considers *how* sequences of talk and subjects are produced through the interview process and, in particular, shaped by different approaches to interviewing. These issues are examined with reference to an interdisciplinary life history project documenting the experiences of young people leaving care.

1.2 Who or what is the subject of (auto) biography? What does biography contain? How does a biographical interview begin and proceed? Researchers have adopted a number of different approaches to biographical interviewing. In this paper, I argue against the particular and often held assumption that (auto) biography necessarily consists of a series of events and experiences retold in chronological order as a coherent narrative, encompassing a 'whole life', and an authentic expression of who an individual is. I argue that the present is a crucial reference point for attempts to re-member the past and that interview talk and subjects are co-produced by interviewer and interviewee. Moreover, the interview presents an occasion for creating narratives of self – for both interviewee and interviewer – and producing subjectivity. I consider how disciplinary perspectives, at play in the research strategy and interview process, create specific subject positions for interviewees to take up, which they in turn variously negotiate, modify and, possibly, refuse. With reference to a specific project, *Care Stories,* I also examine inter-subjective aspects of interviewing and argue that a degree of 'emotional exchange' and 'feeling recognised' are crucial to the shaping of the biographical 'I' and interview talk.

1.3 Thinking about biographical interviewing, and a methodological turn towards the study of individuals, has developed in a number of disciplines and can be seen as part and parcel of a contemporary late modern focus on the individual and reflexivity (Rustin, 2000). This focus has in turn been variously theorised as either emancipatory, offering new worlds of 'freedom and choice' or restrictive, masking dependence and coercion by an exploitative system (Rustin, 2000, 33-4). This paper draws on the academic heritage of a 'biographical turn' in social science (Chamberlayne, *et al* 2000, 1) and the idea in

oral history that the interview is 'an emancipatory act' (ibid, 11).

1.4 The 'biographical turn' in social science, it is argued, is characterised by a shift in thinking and research agendas towards the 'subjective' or 'cultural'. Biographical methods can be used to contextualise the historical actions of subjects, showing how personal and social meanings underpin actions in everyday lived ways (Chamberlayne, *et al* 2000, 1). Oral history has involved collecting personal accounts of the past as part of a process of 'giving voice' - representing the experience of political minorities otherwise absent from official records – with the aim of empowering non-hegemonic individuals and groups (Chamberlayne, *et al* 2000; Perks and Thomson, 1998). In this way, oral history has offered a framework for 'contesting the past', that is, rethinking what the past 'contained', who can speak about it and how it can be represented (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003). Significantly, both social science and oral history approaches to (auto)biography involve a struggle over what matters and who and what can make change. However, biographical research in these disciplines may rest on different assumptions about the ontology of the subject and epistemological status of the autobiographical account.

Subjects and biography

2.1 The underlying ontological assumption in biographical research must be that 'individuals have agency, that biographies make society and are not merely made by it' (Rustin, 2000, 46). However, the subject at the heart of biographical work may be conceptualised in different ways and this undoubtedly impacts on how the subject is questioned, how s/he responds and the autobiographical account produced.

2.2 At one extreme, the subject is seen as a fixed, self-contained essence with his/her 'own authentic voice'. S/he is assumed to be knowledgeable about his/her past and able to 'tell it as it was', thereby producing a narrative of real experience lived outside of the interview. At the other extreme, thanks to the 'cultural' or 'linguistic' turn in post-structuralist theory, the 'idea of an absolute individual authenticity' is rejected and subjects are seen as vehicles for articulations which can be traced to and explained away by cultural contexts (Rustin, 2000, 40-1). This latter position also entails 'a rejection of the conceptual possibility of 'the constituted' (Radstone, 2000, 11). These different perspectives give rise to distinct understandings of memory, which is crucial to biographical work, as either a device for recovering a lost reality or pure imagination.

2.3 Both approaches have limitations. The quest for an unmediated rendering of 'real experience' does not acknowledge that the autobiographical account is shaped by contemporary ways of understanding and talking about topics and emerges through social interaction (Rapley, 2004). The dismissal of 'what happened' is hard to maintain in the face of social encounters in which people inscribe particular events, and their specificity in time and place, with deep material and emotional significance. However, it is both possible and necessary to work between extremes – that is, to regard memory as concerned with the interpretation and representation of events and an active process of producing meanings and subjects. From this perspective, memory is viewed as 'provisional, subjective, concerned with the present rather than fact and the past' (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003, 2).

2.4 The position adopted in this paper is that spoken autobiography is not simply a reality report but is created in the encounter between two subjects and a sharing of conventions for speaking, listening and understanding (Tonkin, 1995). These two subjects, monitoring each other's talk and gestures, work together to jointly produce accounts of experiences and reflections on these (Rapley, 2004). It follows that memory is 'a multi-authored, textual and contextual event' (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998, xiii), produced through a diverse range of contemporary narratives and genres (Radstone, 2000, 11). This paper works from the further assumption that biographical work, which involves re-membering the past and figuring one's place in it, is vitally caught up with processes of identity formation and transformation of self in the present and future (Radstone, 2000). In other words, narratives of personal experience are one of the ways in which selfhood is created (Rapley, 2004; Atkinson and Silverman, 1997).

2.5 However, as mentioned above, biographical research may direct and contain narratives of self through creating subject positions into which it ushers interviewees. Indeed, biographical research (in both social science and oral history) tends assume a biographical 'I' who is typically self reflexive and prepared to speak publicly about his/her experiences. This biographical 'I' is one who is expected to demonstrate a specific form of rationality: drawing lessons from the past and using these to inform future plans. This subject, especially in oral history, is positioned as potentially empowered through the narration of his/her past experience as it becomes visible to and acknowledged by self and others. The questions that follow are: how do interviewees take up, rework or refuse the positions created for them in advance by researchers? To what extent does the interviewee become the 'I' the researcher expects and wants him/her to be? And, if biographical subjects are assumed to have agency, do they demonstrate the sort of agency and rationality expected by the researcher? Or, do they do it differently?

2.6 Different assumptions about the ontology of the subject and epistemological status of the autobiographical account and possibilities for creating narratives of self are embedded in styles of interview and questioning. Next, I consider different approaches to life history interviewing. I go on to look in detail at questioning the interview subject in *Care Stories* and examine the kinds of account and subjects produced.

Chronological and narrative approaches to interviewing

3.1 The life story or 'biographical chronology' approach to interviewing, Perks and Thomson state, is now viewed by many oral historians as 'the most effective way of contextualising specific experiences' (Perks and Thomson, 1998, 102). Ritchie claims that people 'tend to recall things chronologically' (Ritchie, 1995, 66).

3.2 A distinction is often made between "life histories", meaning 'full-scale autobiographical accounts that allow interviewees to recount their entire lives, from childhood to the present' and subject-orientated or "episodic" interviews with members of a group in a particular community or environment (Ritchie, 1995, 16). Commonly, in seeking to elicit a 'whole life story', interviewers start by asking about the narrator's place of birth and earliest memories and working forward in time through major life phases (like childhood, education, work, marriage and parenthood, retirement and so on) (Atkinson, 2004; Bryman, 2004). In this sense, the aesthetics of a chronological interview include a linear sequence of linked events that spans and encapsulates a whole life, beginning as near to the cradle as can be recalled. It is argued that this 'chronological' approach, following the course of events through a 'typical' life cycle, is more natural and therefore less intrusive. It is argued that people know how this format works and expect it, and, consequently, are less directed by the interviewer and more empowered in the interview.

3.3 A strictly chronological approach tends to assume that life cycle and stages (childhood, schooling, work etc) are universal, and does not properly acknowledge the impact on these of history, politics and culture. In contrast, I take the view that these categories take on precise meanings in specific political, social and economic contexts, especially when these entail upheaval and displacement. The use of historically, politically and culturally specific categories, or life stages, as a generic guide for questioning, therefore tends to be normative and normalising. It is more likely to produce summary, superficial and stereotypical information, and conventional justifications. The cumulative nature of experience may be more evident to the interviewer if related as a sequence of chronological events, but this approach risks losing the depth and complexity of *how* experience accumulates through interaction with the past in the present, and is reworked, unevenly and with different intensities. In contrast, I am especially interested in how life events are retold and re-ordered in spoken autobiography as individuals continue to work on making sense of the past and actively create a sense of self in the present through interview.

3.4 There are no model innocent questions (Ritchie, 1995). Asking someone about their earliest memories, where they were born, what they remember of their grandparents, are not casual universal 'openers'. They take on different meanings in different contexts. In the context of the projects in which I have been recently involved, interviewing homeless people, 'looked after' children and refugees, it was apparent that such questions might lead the interviewer too quickly into asking about difficult and painful experiences and possibly cause the interviewee to close off and withdraw. In other words, a chronological (linear) approach may not lead to 'thick dialogue' and the fullest possible appreciation of the meaning of events, which is the purpose of spoken autobiography (Portelli, 2004). It may not leave the narrator feeling empowered.

3.5 Concern with being non-directive and neutral, as Bourdieu (1996) suggests, may simply be a reflection of concern with the external semblance of old methodologies, influenced by scientific disciplines, and the pursuit of 'facts'. The ideal of neutrality and spontaneous revelation of reality is a realist construction (Bourdieu, 1996). The interview subject is assumed to be stable starting point for a narrative of 'what really happened', which both expresses and confirms his/her pre-existing identity. The interviewer's part in creating the narrative and subjectivity as an ongoing process (discursively constructed in interview) are not acknowledged.

3.6 However, as Rapley points out, it is interactionally impossible for an interviewer to 'do neutrality' (that is, ask non-leading questions, never offer his/her own thoughts, ideas or experiences) as he/she is always active. Also, the interviewer has overall control, s/he guides the talk, promotes it 'through questions, silences and response tokens (e.g. okay)' and chiefly decides which questions to follow up (Rapley, 2004, 20). The interviewer speaks first. By opening the conversation the interviewer defines roles and establishes the basis of narrative authority (Portelli, 2004, 28). The interaction between interviewer and interviewee involves a power relation, in which positions of power can shift over the course of the conversation but in which the initiative, and hence power, is located more with the interviewer. In this sense, the emancipatory potential of the interview is necessarily mediated by the research relationship and the context (comprising hegemonic relations) in which it is situated and the autobiographical account is subsequently interpreted and represented (Harding and Gabriel, 2004; Harding 2002).

3.7 An alternative, the *narrative* approach to interviewing, is concerned with understanding 'the individual's unique and changing perspective as it is mediated by *context*', which takes precedence over facts (Miller, 2000, 12). Here, emphasis is on how the individual looks back on his/her life and how s/he chooses to put this into words, what s/he emphasises and what s/he leaves out. At the heart of this approach, is recognition of the interplay and partnership of the interviewee and interviewer and their collaboration to co-create and compose and 'a story that the teller can be pleased with' (Atkinson, 1998, 9; Miller, 2000).

3.8 Gabriele Rosenthal discusses her use of 'biographical narrative interviews', which focus on the 'entire life story both in terms of its genesis and how it is constructed in the present' (2004, 50). This involves an initial reconstruction of the life story – that is, the individual's whole life story as narrated to another in conversation. Specific areas or phases of life are not asked about until a full narrative has been obtained. A second phase involves asking 'internal narrative questions' about topics introduced by the narrator during the first phase. A third phase involves asking 'external narrative questions', which are informed by the research agenda.

3.9 In narrative interviews, it seems, the idea of a strict chronological ordering of events is much less important than the events selected and their biographical significance. Talk appears to radiate out from knots of meaning, rather than unfold along a singular time line. But, where does the narrative interview begin? The most open way to start a narrative interview is to say 'tell me about your life'. Yet, arguably, this too could lead to superficiality as the interviewee does not know what the interviewer would find interesting. Also, 'it is questionable whether a fully subjective narrative interview could exist' (Thompson, 2000, 228). As Thompson points out, to start interviewing 'a social context must be set up, the purpose of recording explained, and at least an initial question asked; and all these, along with unspoken assumptions, create

expectations which shape what follows' (Thompson, 2000, 228).

3.10 In practice, interviewing style is likely to be influenced by research agendas and available resources. The narrative approach described above requires a high degree of skill, confidence and experience in interviewing. It also requires sufficient time (probably paid staff hours and interviewee availability) to conduct three lengthy interviews. This may be an appropriate goal in some research projects. Yet, it is also possible to generate insightful and valuable interview talk with less time face to face and with less experienced and skilled interviewers. And, subject-orientated or 'episodic', rather than 'whole life', interviews may be more relevant to a specific project. Rejection of chronological interviewing as described above, does not mean that sequencing of events and experience, referencing specific times and places, is unimportant but that it can be established in a different way. It may be possible to elicit strands of narrative, and shifting and overlapping plateaux of chronological text, which do not link up in a unified linear sequence, but which are nevertheless full of rich description, detailed interpretations and biographical significance. The issue here is where to start and how to introduce new areas of questioning.

3.11 In addition to the overall approach to the interview, the questions asked, and how they are phrased and emerge, are crucial to the production of accounts and subjects. Interview questions, far from being 'neutral tools for securing information', offer an interpretation of experience and an indication of what is required or considered significant, and cue the interviewee's responses (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 170). Hollway and Jefferson found that when an interviewee 'felt recognised' by the way the a question was phrased in response to what s/he had just said, 'an emotional, intersubjective event was in train' which shaped the subsequent course of the interview (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 170). They distinguish 'narrative questions, which invite subjects to tell stories' from 'explanatory' ones which 'invite subjects to explain why they did what they did' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 170-1). Each style of questioning produces very different data. Narrative questions elicit stories of events, which contain clues to their biographical meaning, whereas 'explanatory questions invite merely conventional discursive justifications' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 171).

3.12 Next, I discuss a specific life history project focusing on how both subjects and accounts are produced through the research relationship and agenda and how these productions are further shaped by the researcher's approach to interviewing and the ways in which individual questions are posed. I consider how interviewees variously take up the subject positions offered.

Care Stories

4.1 The context and design of the project *Care Stories,* based on interviews with young people leaving care, has been discussed in detail in a previous paper (Harding and Gabriel, 2004). An interdisciplinary approach (involving social workers, family therapists, life history researchers, digital media practitioners) focused on young people's experience of being looked after by a local authority in London. Detailed stories of 'being in care' were video recorded with the purpose of both 'giving voice' to care leavers and producing a video to be used in training professionals. The project aimed to record young people's accounts of what worked and what did not work, and what could have been different and how, and to represent their emotional needs. In other words, the project had a clear thematic focus, definition of interview subjects and a need to make links between the individual and the social. The video produced was entitled *Care Stories*. However, the working title of the project was 'have your say', which encapsulated the explicit agenda of the project and helped to produce the biographical subject as needing to be, and potentially becoming, 'empowered'.

4.2 The seven interviewees were all self-selected, aged between 16 and 19 years of age, in the process of leaving care and being supported in this by the local authority's leaving care team. Interviewers were communications and digital media students with little prior experience of interviewing, although they received detailed training as part of the project and their associated studies. Interviewees and interviewers had much in common – age, social and cultural background and shared leisure interests (Harding and Gabriel, 2004). Interviewers spent time on two occasions, at social events, talking informally with interviewees and getting to know about their experiences and concerns (Harding and Gabriel, 2004). These encounters, together with related reading and tutorial discussion, formed a basis for planning interviews as well as developing rapport.

4.3 It was apparent that interviewers were concerned about managing (what they expected to be) emotionally charged interviews and, in particular, getting in 'too deep too soon' by asking interviewees about early childhood. Interviewers were worried that interviewees would feel intruded upon, upset and withdraw. So, in terms of the interview method, a strictly chronological approach seemed inappropriate. A narrative approach as described by Rosenthal would have been hard to achieve as only one interview with each young person could be conducted and interviewees already knew the research agenda and fully subscribed to it – especially the 'have your say' thrust of it. Given the agenda and context of the project, we decided on a thematic approach to interviewing with an emphasis on narrative questioning. In the event, a fuller account of life experience was often produced as part of contextualising and making sense of more recent experiences.

4.4 We discussed themes and topics, which reflected the research agenda, and thought about how these might be translated into questions, in situ and as appropriate, within the flow of conversation. Interviewers were asked to work around these themes, whilst listening 'in stereo' to both dominant and muted channels of discourse (Anderson and Jack (1998), and being open to interviewees introducing other topics. Generally speaking, interviewers were taught to 'ask some questions', 'selectively follow up on specific themes or topics' and 'allow interviewees space to talk at length' (Rapley, 2004, 22). They were encouraged to ask narrative questions and to avoid explanatory questions and conventional justifications thereby invoked (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

4.5 This exercise provided a conceptual map or guide for the interviewers, rather than a detailed plan and ready-made questions. It was intended to enhance interviewer confidence, and ensure that interviews covered similar terrain, thereby providing a basis for fulfilling the project's aims of linking the individual with the group, by providing a public platform on which to speak about personal experience, and, hopefully, make a difference.

Questioning subjects

5.1 Interviews all began with questions about young people's lives in the present – where they lived, what it was like, how they spent their spare time and their interests – and continued with follow up questions about what had been mentioned. Here, the aim was to explore how the interviewee wanted to present his/her self and life in the present of the interview, being sensitive to clues and invitations to ask about some topics in more detail and tracing the genealogy of these. We felt that, without understanding the present and what is important to an individual, it was difficult to know how to ask about the past. Planned topics, which had not been covered in this way, could be introduced subsequently.

5.2 There were good examples of interviewers asking narrative questions and eliciting detailed stories full of 'biographical significance'. There were good examples of interviewers waiting for an appropriate moment at which to introduce questions on key themes of the project. For instance, after much talk about current activities and interests, Elizabeth (interviewer) asks Kathy (interviewee), when she first moved into foster care.

> Y: *So when did you first go into a foster care placement that wasn't with your family?*
> K: Em, my first foster care assistant was in Finsbury Park. I remember that one because… That one I did not understand at all. It was just, I was about 10 years old and I moved into a house and the lady was very nice but she had an older daughter and at the time she was attending college or whatever it was. And she was nice to me but she was… I don't know, but she was like a person who will say to you: here's your bedroom, here's your knife, here's your fork, here's your spoon and here's your plate and here's your bowl and here's your cup. She would name everything else for you. She would tell you: right then and you're not allowed to touch this and you're not allowed to touch that and you're not allowed to touch this. That's the kind of roles she gave me instead of saying: hello, hi, how are you? It wasn't that kind of conversation. She immediately, like from sitting in the sitting room, from meeting her from 5 seconds, she'd take me into the kitchen and into the bedroom and into the bathroom… It was like, I don't know… It was more like a Bed and Breakfast. Like you know when you go to a bed and breakfast you get introduced to the things that you're allowed to use, the equipments that you're allowed to use and nothing else – those are the things that I was using. And it was like…It was really strange to me 'cause I was like, it was really strange to me 'cause I was only ten years old and I'm meant to have someone who is more like a parent to me more than acting like a … what you call it? A hostess? She was acting more like a hostess.

> Y: *What did that make you feel like when she didn't welcome you into the house and kind of made you feel like you were a guest at a Bed and Breakfast?*
> K: (long silence)… It made me feel as if like… You're beneath her. It's like you're the un-existed type of person. It's like she doesn't…she doesn't recognize you or something. It's like…that's how it actually made me feel that time and one of the reasons why I got in trouble and moved out so quickly because I never really. It wasn't like a home to me so that's why I never came after school… Like that time I was attending primary school and I wanted to stay at school the longest I could. Like if there is a teacher, she needed help with like the tidying up or something I'd be there at the back of the class and I'm trying to help and I'll be the last person to leave the school at like the same time as the teacher… just so that I don't have to go back home yet.

5.3 The interviewer then asked about the next and subsequent foster care placements and what they were like. After about 20 minutes of thick description, the interviewer reflects:

> Y: *You've really had a lot of different places then?*
> K: Yeah I have. And I've met so many different varieties of people as well you, it's like…I met a whole world of people (Cannot make out) It's like, I don't know, it's like imagine living on planet earth yeah, and you've got different people that you have to live with but you remember that this is not your home. That's how I look at it as I live out in space or something. Planet earth is not my home I have to keep looking at it that way because I think when I say it's *my* home my home will be somewhere where I put *my* footprint in it.

> Y: *Have you ever stayed anywhere, where you at least partly have some, some feeling of being at home and feeling welcomed and feeling I belong here? Or I could belong here?*
> K: Um-um. Never...never. Seriously because it's just one of those things because you've had so many, houses, that you've gone through and so many... I don't know you loose the value of em place of your own. You loose that whole thing… You loose that whole… and plus you loose your respec' your self-respect in a ways when you keep moving from place to place you loose your self and your self-respect as well goes along with it.

5.4 The interviewer responded very quickly and intuitively to the interviewee's experience of being treated like a guest in a bed and breakfast and correctly interpreted that she felt unwelcome and that this was of central importance. The interviewee clearly felt recognised and that her concerns were understood and this

led to a great deal of subsequent talk on the topic. This line of questioning was especially significant as Cathy herself identified *not* being recognised a core issue, making her feel put down and as though she didn't exist ('It made me feel as if like… You're beneath her. It's like you're the un-existed type of person. It's like she doesn't…she doesn't recognize you or something')

5.5 The interviewer helped to maintain this reflective thread of talk by asking if the interviewee has ever stayed anywhere where she felt at home and welcomed. This elicited a detailed description of what *matters* and what a young child might need and how she might like to be treated in this circumstance. She highlighted the importance of home as a place of social and emotional belonging, not only a physical structure, and its significance for identity. Subsequently, she spoke of her passion for photography and desire to create a photographic record of the places she had lived, excluding she said forcefully, the people she had lived with. The exchange between interviewer and interviewee opened a space for a confidant and articulate biographical subject to critically reflect on her sense of self, in the past and future, and its connections with place. As a matter of course, the interviewer reflected back what was said and asked 'how did that feel?', thereby demonstrating attentiveness, interest and concern. Kathy readily assumed the position offered through the interview encounter and, I think, felt 'recognised'.

5.6 This was not strictly a chronological interview, though it contained some chronology: for example, moving between foster carers and social workers. Nor was it a narrative interview. It did, however, contain mostly narrative questioning, which appeared to contribute to the interviewee feeling recognised and the possibility that 'emotional intersubjective events' were in play and contributing to the development of the interview. Possibly, as a consequence, there was a great deal of talk about identity, loss, trust, home and relationships with friends, teachers and her family of origin and, unexpectedly, towards the end of the interview, her early experience as a child refugee.

5.7 There were a few examples of less responsive questioning. These occurred only in sections of interview and never characterised the interview as a whole. In the following (unusual) example, the interviewer repeatedly failed to acknowledge and respond to what had just been said by the interviewee.

> T: How did you feel when you arrived?
> M: I was scared I felt like an outsider
> T: Did you feel welcome to that place?
> M: Not really, na they were nice, they did treat me nice.
> T: Were there any rules to the house that you had to adjust to?
> M: Ya, you had to say where you were going, even to the toilet, it was never like home
> T: Did you ask for help?
> M: If you don't ask, they don't help you don't get close to each other.. the family. I've been to around 15-20 places, homes, children's houses. I've been pushed around a bit it was never my choice things just come up, I am not saying that it wasn't my fault sometimes but things just came up lots of "things happened"
> T: Did you move school?

5.8 Here, the interviewee introduces several topics which could be explored much further: feeling like an outsider, not feeling welcome, feeling like the foster home was never 'home', moving between so many homes, feeling pushed around, "things" happening. The interviewer appears to silence him by failing to acknowledge what he has said and to inquire further, eventually changing the subject completely by asking 'did you move school'? The line of questioning suggests that what he has said is uninteresting and insignificant.

5.9 However, this sequence of talk occurred right at the very start of the interview and, I think, mainly reflects nervousness on the part of the interviewer, who was conducting her first interview. Later in the interview, Michael speaks in detail about significant and difficult feelings: being alone, rejected and unloved by his family, and feeling unlovable (see quote below). In this case, despite the specific questions asked, I think the broader context of the interview and social relations of the project conveyed a sense of warmth, respect and recognition to which Michael responded by talking vehemently about what matters to him.

Narratives of self

6.1 The young people interviewed described themselves as problematically at the centre of communications – repeatedly impelled to speak about themselves and discussed by professionals - which were out of their control.

6.2 A consequence of moving frequently between foster carers and social workers was that they had to begin new relationships and tell 'their stories' over again. Several interviewees said they were reluctant to repeatedly 'open up to' and trust yet another professional and anxious about the growing number of people who knew a great deal about them. They were concerned about privacy and confidentiality and having little or no control over how information about them circulated. Kathy spoke cogently about what she called 'invisible baggage', meaning the notes that are written about her, are unseen by her, and precede her in every new placement, shaping the new carer's expectations of her before they meet.

> Y: *And what does that do, having to build a new relationship with a foster carer if, if you feel like you're dragging baggage around every time?*
> K: (Long pause) I think the baggage is always there…It's like…I don't know they'-When you get in your clothes and you pack-When you leave a house and you're packing your clothes and you're packing your books and your packing everything in your life. You're also packing, em…an in' what do they call it? An invisible package there as well, which is the piece of papers that you can't see that is obviously floating around you and everybody else is reading

about you and they know about you, they're doing courses about you.

6.3 This interviewee, and others, wanted to speak out publicly about what it felt like to be pre-judged and how this is unfair especially when children are not informed in advance of foster carers' experience. Connected with this, several young people expressed indignation at sitting in meetings again and again and being discussed but not involved, as decisions were made about their lives.

6.4 Obviously, this project also placed the young people in the position of being expected to tell their stories again in interview. Ironically, the video made from the interviews was to be shown to people 'doing courses' on looked after children. Perhaps, the difference here was that the young people chose to participate and critically reflect on their experience of foster care, at a distance, and were offered an effective medium (video) for doing this and an audience of relevant professionals. Young people were involved in the process of planning interviews and, although they did not participate in the editing process, they viewed the edited video and approved it before it was shown to professionals. 'Being listened to' was a dominant theme in the project's design and implementation and it struck a clear chord with interviewees. The interviews helped to produce biographical subjects who felt unheard and wanted to speak directly of their experiences to professionals. Michael said forcefully 'those kids in care they want to be heard' and, turning to camera, 'Whoever is going to look at this [video] please sit down and listen and try to understand'.

6.5 Several topics arose which had not been anticipated in the interview planning. For example, in all but one interview, interviewees expressed deep disappointment and regret that foster carers had cared for them not out of love but as a job, for money. They felt they missed out on something that children ought to be able to expect (from their parents): unconditional love, being put first and have enduring parent/child relationships. All expressed a sense of profound loss and sadness that own their biological parents had not been able to care for them.

> S: *Erm all right, is there anything else you would like to say?*
> P**:** (Sighs) (giggles) I don't really know but erm, I'm not saying that people shouldn't become foster carers but you have to have the love, you have to, you cannot be selfish. If you wanna become, you know erm what's it called, a foster carer, but you have to love and care for children, you have to know it's not about the money, but, you know, it's all about love, and, your just trying to help the person, it's not always about the money, so erm that's all I can say

> Y: *What would you like to see in place for children in care?*
> K: I think the best way is like… … I don't think looking after a child for money is the best thing either. So…my ideal foster carer would be a person who doesn't care about money, who care about you…And puts you the first because that's, that's you'…Actually children in care are missing is somebody putting them first. No one actually puts you first. They put you either on the second role or on third gr'-like third role...and …

6.6 Although not asked directly about it, six out of the seven interviews mentioned that 'kids in care' were often seen as bad and several said that they themselves had made life difficult for carers and tried to explain why this occurred.

> A: *Do you think the care system may bring out some peoples worst qualities?*
> G: I think a home does, if they have a stable environment then maybe not, let me explain it a bit more I was moved around between different families it was always the same then they moved me to this family that I still keep in contact with now and they treated me like I wasn't a foster child like I was actually part of their family I think that's the way its got to be. Then you stop thinking I'm just a foster child you don't really care about me you start to think if you're saying stop being bad its because you care about me not because you're going to get in trouble a bad child wants to be placed in a nice home and settle down

> T: *What would you want them to do in order for you to be in a different place from where you are today?*
> M: Well basically I am not saying everyone is bad, there are .. lots of nice people around …but basically I had some rough times before hand ..till you get used to them, those nice people you kinda make their lives hell if you want to or not, because you can't trust them straight away, because you hurt, and your feelings have been broken before, and your trust is being lost, and how do I say the first thing you know is that they are not your family that the thing that the problem when you break up that point when you realise you are all by yourself that you wont get anyone to love you, your family never loved you that why you are in care, now that I say, if you didn't receive love from your family, noone else will give it to you.

6.7 Here, the interviewees reflected on what a child in care 'really wants' - to stop being bad and be treated like part of the foster carer's family - and how hard it was to learn trust and love *in care*, especially when they felt abandoned and unloved by their families of origin and, as a result, unlovable.

Biographical subjects

7.1 What sort of biographical subjects were produced through these interviews? How were narratives of self contained and shaped by the subject positions offered by the project? What were the parameters of agency proposed? And, how did the young people negotiate these?

7.2 Callon and Rabeharisoa (2004) suggest that the interview simulates a public arena on a reduced scale

in which the interviewee may feel summoned to justify and explain his/ her behaviour and decisions. Reflecting on their own interviews with patients suffering from serious genetic diseases, they suggest that the subject position constructed by the interview, as an experimental device, is that of 'the autonomous individual, free to take her or his own decisions and responsible for the consequences' (Callon and Rabeharisoa, 2004, 12). They discuss the case of one man who refused to talk, thereby refusing form of agency proposed for him, because it challenged the particular (different) identity for which he was fighting, and demonstrate how researchers may reduce interviewees to silence.

7.3 *Care Stories* presented subjects who appeared very willing to speak publicly about their experiences. Asking about care, how the interviewee went into care and what it was like, tended to produce narratives of change, different ways of coming to terms with this and, importantly, what caring can and should mean. Talking in this way, and the fact that the young person was in the process of *leaving care,* helped to place painful experiences at a distance and position the interviewee as a survivor coming to terms with and learning from the past and moving on. He/she was actively in charge of interpreting his/her own past and challenging stereotypes of the 'looked after child' both as victim and bad. In this sense, interviewees were facilitated in responding to a prevailing discourse and asserting a counter discourse. Interviewees were also positioned as consumers giving feedback on services and making things better for others and, therefore, exercising a degree of altruism.

7.4 Overall, the process of interviewing tended to produce subjects who described being displaced and disempowered and had plans for an independent, successful and self-possessed future. It produced reflective subjects, who were experts on what children in care need and a ready source of information for social workers and policy makers. In other words, *Care Stories* constructed the subject position of 'reflective independent individual' and, for the most part, interviewees took up this position.

7.5 However, one interviewee refused the type of agency proposed. Though reflective, she declined to feel confident about the future and celebrate independence. She was distressed about leaving care and moving to semi-independent living. Whilst the others were pleased to have their own flat and move on from foster care, she insisted that she was not ready and wanted to stay with her foster carer. She was extremely angry at the local authority over this. She wanted to make a difference but to her own immediate situation.

7.6 It is important to note here that the subject positions described above were to a large extent negotiated in pre interview discussions between interviewers and interviewees. These encounters enabled interviewees and interviewers to get to know each other, find common ground (shared interests and concerns) and establish trust. They helped to create an understanding that the interviewers were on the side of the young people leaving care, respected and admired them, and that together they wanted to get a message across to professionals working with looked after children. Interviewers and interviewees, all young people, got on very well with each other and engaged in mutually reflective conversations about what it means to be a young person and the emotional resources needed to develop a sense of independence. Pre interview conversations led interviewers to reflect on their own families, emotional lives and self-perceptions. They shifted from a position of detachment to one of deep empathy. Here, a shifting interplay of distance and closeness, ignorance and empathy, may have been especially effective in producing thick dialogue. Developing closeness enabled understanding, and a sense of distance and not knowing (what it was like) provided the impetus to ask questions.

7.7 The research design constructed subject positions for interviewers – through pre interview social encounters with interviewees and reading and tutorial discussion – as interested, understanding and responsive. The production of interviewers as subjects, though not addressed here, is analysed in another paper (Harding 2002). Through pre interview exchanges, interviewees and interviewers jointly established the purpose of the interviews: having a say and making a difference, challenging negative stereotypes, presentation of self as an experienced survivor. Here, I believe, the context and basis for shared understandings and intersubjective emotional exchange in subsequent interviews were established.

Summary

8.1 This paper has considered how biographical subjects and accounts were produced through interview in *Care Stories,* focusing on approaches to interviewing and styles of questioning. The critical approach developed has its academic roots in a 'biographical turn' in social science and the ideal of empowerment through interview in oral history. However, it has made some distinctive interpretations of this heritage.

8.2 I have been critical of a strictly chronological approach to interviewing. I have taken the view that to ask questions, which elicit a rendering of a person's life experience in chronological order referencing selected cultural markers, is not unobtrusive and neutral and does not lead to a more 'truthful' rendering of the past and experience. Culture, language, and power relations are inevitably at play in the interview encounter and production of biographical subjects and accounts. Also, subjects are not fixed essences waiting to express themselves and interview talk is not a spontaneous rendering of past reality beyond the interview. Rather, interviews are occasions for producing subjectivity through personal narratives in the present that work on and interpret the past with an eye on the future.

8.3 In discussing *Care Stories,* I treated the interview as a collaborative social encounter and focused on the production of subjects and accounts within specific discursive conventions. I considered the impact on these productions of the project's agenda and context. I examined the ways in which the project may have directed narratives of self though the subject positions it offered to participants. I drew attention to the inter-subjective and emotional aspects of the interviews and, in particular, the importance of 'feeling recognised'. In this context, the idea of 'empowerment' through interview has to be understood as partial and part of an ongoing process of self reflexivity, production and transformation within the research encounter and hegemonic relations which constitute it.

8.4 After consideration of styles of interview (chronological or narrative) and types of question (narrative or explanatory), the project developed a hybrid approach tending towards the spirit of narrative interviewing, acknowledging the value of some chronology (but not being driven by it), and aware of what would work given available resources. For these reasons, interviews in *Care Stories* began with an exploration of the present and moved carefully to highlighted aspects of the past. The interviews conducted in *Care Stories* were not narrative interviews but were informed by some of the same concerns and involved some narrative questioning. It was apparent that some interviewers were more confident and more skilled at narrative questioning and that this consistently produced the most detailed and complex accounts. Others asked more explanatory questions, which, nevertheless, produced strong and clear reflections on what being in care meant and what worked and what did not. In all interviews, significant talk emerged on painful and intimate topics, without direct questioning – for example, feelings of loss, abandonment, being unloved and unlovable. Professionals (social workers and family therapists) said they were deeply impressed and that they themselves could not have elicited such detailed and frank stories.

8.5 In *Care Stories*, I suggest, a series of 'intersubjective emotional events' were in play, leading to a great deal of 'thick dialogue', which were only partially explained by narrative questioning. It seems likely that the overall context and process of the project, and individual relations within research pairs, played a strong part in enabling the young people interviewed to feel 'recognised'. The research pairs all fully subscribed to the project's agenda and purpose - 'have your say' - in particular, a perceived need to speak about experience, to have people providing services listen and to counter prevailing contemporary discourses on and negative stereotypes of 'kids in care'. This appeared to be enhanced by the use of video (Harding and Gabriel, 2004).

8.6 Each account in *Care Stories* was undoubtedly the distinctive product of a singular relationship, producing biographical subjects who were reflective, articulate and expert (interviewees) and responsive and understanding (interviewers). Each account was unique. Portelli points out that what is said in interview may be made of up fragments of previously told narrative, but has probably 'never been told *in that form* before' to that interviewer (Portelli, 2004, 24). These accounts are also inevitably subject to subsequent reinterpretations by subjects and audiences.

8.7 It is rightly argued that biographical accounts, to be epistemologically significant, must also link and illuminate connections between the individual and society, personal and public, individual experience and social patterns and change (Chamberlayne, *et al* 2000, Rustin, 2000, Portelli, 1998). The purpose of *Care Stories* was to represent the unique experience of individuals and to try to make a difference by producing a video for display and discussion among professionals. The circulation and reception of this video is part of the ongoing production of subjects, what matters, and change.

Postscript

9.1 I understand that readers of an online journal might hope not only to read sections of interview transcript but also to view video clips directly. Unfortunately, this has not been possible as I did not obtain the necessary consents at the outset of the project. Some restrictions were imposed by the Director of Social Services for the borough involved because of the vulnerability of the young people involved. Consent was given for anonymised quotations from transcripts in written papers and for the use of video in small seminars for professionals, where a social worker or family therapist from the original project team is present to contextualise the video and facilitate discussion.

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