

# Chapter 15

## Re-introducing Life History Methodology: An Equitable Social Justice Approach to Research in Education



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**Abstract** Educational researchers who are mindful of social justice are suggested to consider contemporary research methodologies' historical alignment with colonization: Expansion and the ensuing epistemicide. This chapter argues that life history methodology can be used as a counter to traditional research methodologies and provides space to collect and analyze data in a way that counters past traditions. Contemporary educational research methodologies and methods are replete with historical baggage so pronounced that social justice advocates can, unwittingly, engage in research methods that reify the harms that they seek to counter. Life history provides real opportunities for educational researchers to develop new knowledge by listening to and validating the experiences of the most vulnerable populations. Life history challenges the idea of a universal truth—stemming from Eurocentric positionalities.

### Research Methodologies and Hegemony

In my social justice approach to research I am mindful of contemporary research methodologies' historical impact in the establishment of colonization. This chapter talks about European expansion and the various entanglements it wrought, displacement, violence, and death, in pursuit of conquests. Contemporary research methodologies are aligned with this history. Discursively, contemporary research methodologies in education impose, violate, and censure the epistemologies and cultures of dominated and minoritized Black and Brown communities and students (Battiste, 2013; Sharp, 2008; Smith, 1999; Willinsky, 2000). In my attempt to sidestep these educational research landmines, I am cautious of this history and its

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contemporary effects. I argue that life history methodology has the potential to offset the entanglements of violence, marginalization, and imposition embedded in research methodologies. Life history research as a methodology consists of a collective of life stories that comprise the main data source. Life history methodology consists of a theoretical analysis of the method—life stories and the socio-cultural, socio-economic, and political aspects and assumptions related to these methods. My application of life history seeks to counter the problematic elements found in the culture of educational research.

### *Life History as a Counterculture*

I utilize the life history methodology as an antithesis to traditional educational research methods. Some scholars call life history methodology a counterculture—a divergence from traditional educational research methods—the ways we come to know including the strategies, paradigms, research models, grammars, and theories in educational research (Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Life history as a counterculture is complementary to the necessitated cultural insurgency and resistance to the culture of education policy (Stein, 2004) discourses and practices that deficitizes policy beneficiaries often identified as minoritized communities (Black and Brown students).

Life historians re-present life stories as told to them and are mindful of their own frames of reference. I utilize life history to help highlight cultural elements of educational discourses and practices. A life story is a rendition of a lived experience, an interpretive layer, but moving to life history needs additional stories, theories, context, and further interpretations, which adds richness. Goodson and Sikes (2001) argue for life stories as the starting point for life history work. The life stories of research participants, as well as researchers, can be central to a life history study, as part of the life history methodology (Wright, 2017). Goodson and Sikes (2001), in following many eminent sociologists, suggest that life history methodology is the perfect method to study any aspect of social life. Although being a community member is not required in life history, I argue that life history methodology, while not without potential for abuse and misuse, is effective at explaining the lived experiences and perspectives of the community under study. The abuse and misuse that can occur have a long history, some of which have been referenced in this chapter, such as misinterpretations from outsiders that often lead to violence. However, abuse and misuse can occur from within as alluded to in Khalifa's (2015) *Can Blacks Be Racists?* I conducted my dissertation as well as other research in communities where I was born and raised. I share similar histories and culture, and I understand the local discourses, idioms, and practices found in those communities. In my utilization of life history methodology, I situate myself in the study as part of the greater life history project.

## Life History Research: Stories from an Urban District

Speaking in and through stories then becomes a way to engage self-transformation a kind of rite of passage...I am aware of the value of story and its ability to transform my research, and resist the Eurocentric frameworks that privileged other peoples' stories and analyses... (Battiste, 2013, p. 17)

I utilize the life history methodology as a collection of stories, including my own, from current or former residents of an urban Connecticut school district. I was born and raised within the communities that comprise the school district under study. The life stories add *culturally responsive* information to the study of educational studies. My approach to the life history methodology is to humanize the experiences of African Americans, Latinxs, and others in the urban communities, by chronicling samples from their lived experiences. Moreover, the recording of these narratives works to fill gaps in educational history and in research on Black and Latinx/urban education in the United States in general and in urban communities in Connecticut more specifically.

### *Historiography and Life History Methodology*

Life history methodology is used throughout qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. Life historians work from the language individuals use to express and define their lives (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Jones (1983) called upon a qualitative approach to social analysis using life history and regarded it as a unique tool used to examine and analyze the subjective experience of individuals and their construction of the social world. Life historians examine how individuals narrate their experiences and perceptions of their lived social context (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Jones (1983) noted that “of all research methods, it [life history methodology] perhaps comes closest to allowing the researcher access to how individuals create and portray the social world around them” (p. 147). Rubby Dhunpath (2000) suggests that the life history methodology “approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world” (p. 544). Life history methodology is interpretive and epistemologically grounded in the everyday, commonsense world (common to those who reside in their worlds) and is ontologically rooted within the constructions and explanations members of those worlds ascribe to their reality and actions (Denzin, 1983; Jones, 1983).

## *Life History: Stories and Coping*

Gramling and Carr (2004) outlined the various dimensions and methodological considerations of life history, including coping. They pointed out that life history was “a holistic, qualitative account of life that emphasizes the experiences of the individual and how the person copes. It links experiences to subsequent actions and theoretical perspectives with personal experiences” (Gramling & Carr, 2004, p. 208). There is a growing body of interdisciplinary literature—psychology, philosophy, and the natural sciences—acknowledging the value of narratives (Dhunpath, 2000; McAdams, 2008).

*Coping and time encapsulated.* In the historiographical research literature, research methods such as biographies, oral histories, and life stories are distinguished from life history methodology. Oral history is a method in which memory and experience can be captured for future generations, which can be a component of life history methodology. Life history methodology is broader in scope and consists of a theoretical analysis of life stories. Also, life history is more holistic; it seeks to capture how individuals cope. It links these actions (coping) and personal experiences with theoretical perspectives. Life history is also distinguished by a framework of time (Gramling & Carr, 2004). For example, my life history encapsulates the timeframe from 2010 to 2016.

The life stories in my work (Wright, 2017) illustrated how we—my family and others from the urban community that I was raised in—coped—under the socio-cultural/socio-economic climate, which included deindustrialization, well-documented political malfeasance, mass incarceration, failed schools and schooling practices, and ambivalent educators (Wright, 2017). These life stories, which underscored and evidenced these ills, were removed from life experiences, interpreted, and made into text. A life story is a rendition of a lived experience, an interpretive layer, but the move to life history needs additional stories and context and further interpretations, such as interviews, documents, and theory, which add richness.

*Life stories and life history as creating identity.* Goodson and Sikes (2001) asserted “life history research provides [opportunity] to tell your life story, to craft a narrative that links together events, experiences, and perceptions, [it] is the explicit opportunity to create an identity” (p. 41). This happens in all social situations, not just in the context of research. People tell their stories in a certain way for a certain purpose, guided by their environments, which helps construct the identity that they wish to re-present (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

*Identifying urban life in Connecticut.* The construction of life history is a joint creation between the life historian and the storytellers. Life history methodology is appropriate for equitable social justice educational research and praxis. I conducted a study in Connecticut, a state often thought of for its affluence and wealth. Rarely do people associate Connecticut, its cities, and neighborhoods with impoverished Black and Brown families and failing schools. These life stories of people living in the shadows of Connecticut’s affluence are brought to the center and amplified (Wright, 2017).

According to Goodson and Sikes (2001), life historians are creating and crafting stories when they design and write their research. But it is not only life historians who are implicated in creating/crafting stories in their research. No matter their approach or method, all researchers—quantitative, qualitative, or historical—are engaged in storytelling. Scholars, Clough (1992) and Goodson and Sikes (2001), have posited that all representations of reality, even statistical representations, are narrative constructs and as a result creative constructs. Similar to scholars engaged in other methodological approaches, life historians re-present life stories as told to them within the context of their own frames of reference.

*Life stories and life history as pedagogy.* Some scholars advocate for life history as a pedagogical tool, asserting that it can be a cathartic and liberating research tool (Dhunpath, 2000; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Life histories provide stories of people (idioms, authenticated definitions, and interpretations), struggling through real problems and other situations. They offer liberation from indifferent and disengaged researchers and research generated by samples, and faceless subjects without histories and social context.

Humans in general, and researchers and educators in particular, are fallible humans with vulnerabilities that constantly resurface. Curriculum historian Ivor Goodson (1992) argued that because teaching is personal, it is critical to know the type of person the teacher is. I argue that it is equally critical to know educators and researchers—who they are, their politics, and their inclinations. Educators and researchers are humans shaped by histories, politics, values, morals, and a world-view (Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson, 1992).

## Interpretive Framework

The epistemological position of life history is interpretive as opposed to normative. An interpretive lens seeks to understand the phenomena from within (emic) as opposed to a normative style of inquiry, which seeks to study phenomena from without (etic) (Jones, 1983). *Emic* researchers are sometimes referred to as insiders. An insider starts from the perspectives of the research participants: The concepts and categories deemed meaningful and appropriate by members of the culture whose beliefs and actions are a part of the analysis (President & Fellows Harvard University, 2008; Smith, 1999). *Etic* researchers are sometimes referred to as outsiders. An outsider uses theories and perspectives from outside of the setting being analyzed. The words *emic* and *etic*, according to linguistics and anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s, refer to two different approaches toward researching human beings. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the concepts have evolved and have been adopted by various researchers across disciplines including education (President & Fellows Harvard University, 2008).

### ***Insider-Outsider Perspectives: Emic and Etic Approaches to Research***

The interpretive lens offered by life history informs us that knowledge and understanding are bound by context. Jones (1983) contends that context is the result of a socially constructed world of patterns and frames. Interpretive inquiry seeks to address questions asked, along with the historical and social context that they are asked from “within” social phenomena. This context emerging from within social phenomena brings “to the surface the essential dimensions of a social process or social context” (Jones, 1983, p. 150). This means that context should always be according to the lived perspectives of the research participants and less an interpretation of those lived experiences by an outsider, who may exhibit little care that the interpretations are representative and authentic.

A normative inquiry, or studying phenomena from without, gives the researcher “ontological control.” Jones (1983) argued that a study done from without “is inclined to impose a definition on the subject of inquiry and to postulate relationships of a hypothetical kind” (p. 150). This outsider control exercised by the researcher is a common research protocol. This *ontological control* often leads to misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and, to varying degrees, replicating the violence of research that was central to colonization.

### ***Between an Emic Rock and Etic Hard Place***

While some methodologies rely more heavily on one approach over the other, “many researchers live in the tension between these two extremes” (President & Fellows Harvard University, 2008, p. 1). A completely etic approach to research risks overlooking potentially new and/or groundbreaking concepts and perspectives. And at the same time, all researchers come into a research project with previous concepts, perspectives, and lenses through which they see the world (President & Fellows Harvard University, 2008). Emic and etic research methods are academic concepts introduced in the mid-twentieth century by anthropologists and linguists to study humans and as such are engulfed in ethnocentric (Eurocentric) and political controversy (President & Fellows Harvard University, 2008; Sharp, 2008; Smith, 1999). Nonetheless, insider and outsider, emic and etic, perspectives are used in my engagement with life history.

## **Critiques of Life History**

One of the challenges of doing life history research is the transformation of the life stories of individuals into a life history. This transformation requires the inclusion of historical context and an acknowledgment of subjectivity (Goodson & Sikes,

2001). Goodson and Sikes (2001) warned that this was “a dangerous move, for it offers the researcher considerable ‘colonizing’ power to ‘locate’ the life story with all its inevitable selections, shifts and silences” (p. 17). The colonizing danger of moving from life stories to life history is a real concern that the life historian must contend with.

### *Outsider from Within: Inside and Out*

I use my own life story as part of my life history research. Stories from my life indicate familiarity with urban Black and Brown discourses in the city, idioms, and taken-for-granted knowledge. In many ways, I am an *insider* in the study. My connection makes me accessible to the circumstances of my study as a person both within and outside of the phenomena. I have personal connections with many of the people whose stories I included in my life history study. I am honest about these connections, and I attempt to be reflective about my own place in the life history (Wright, 2017). However, as an academic, I am a part of a larger institution and academic community with different discourses, idioms, and taken-for-granted knowledge, which also makes me an *outsider*. Juggling these two worlds as both an insider and an outsider is a primary task for the life historian. My insider connections do not guarantee that I will not misrepresent these communities. An insider is still capable of imposing and inflicting violence upon the community under study with an intentionally or otherwise skewed collection and analysis processes.

According to Rubby Dhunpath (2000), there are three possible responses to critiques of life history research. The first possibility is not to respond at all. But avoidance is inappropriate, and “would smack of the same kind of intellectual arrogance often exhibited by empiricists” (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 543). However, in answering the question, the life historian should be mindful of her/his engagement in the paradigm wars: The socially constructed dichotomy between empirical research designs and other research designs—the quantitative versus qualitative/humanities versus social science debates (Gage, 1989; Howe, 2009; Tadajewski, 2009). The second possibility according to Dhunpath is to aggressively defend the virtues of the life history research approach at the risk of becoming an apologist for its legitimacy, thereby reaffirming the dominance espoused by empiricists. A third possibility is to stake a claim of life history as a counterculture to traditional research methodologies (Dhunpath, 2000). To position life history as a counterculture provides leverage toward an intervention into Westernization (Mignolo, 2011, 2012), its method—White supremacy (Khalifa, 2015)—and its racist discourses, rhetoric, and practices located in the culture of educational praxis as indicated in Stein’s (2004) culture of education policy thesis and others. The culture of education policy frames policy beneficiaries as culturally deficient and blames their historical, socio-cultural, and socio-economic predicament on a lack of, and a need for, *standard American values* (Stein, 2004).

## *Interdisciplinary Confusion*

When it is done well, life story methods and the life history research methodology crosses disciplinary boundaries. This allows the convergence of multiple disciplines while maintaining the integrity of each. However, some scholars raise concerns and cite confusion associated with this approach. Scholars have argued that the plurality of voices could cause harsh discord and fragmented perspectives, which could lead to a culture of misunderstanding and miscommunication (Dhunpath, 2000; Hargreaves, 2011).

*Identifying importance and representation.* The relationship between the researcher and the researched and the act of deeming someone or a situation as important is further complicated by the researcher's veneration or disdain for the participants in the study. Such a situation is potentially dysfunctional. Furthermore, how is life history positioned outside of the oppressive conditions, specifically in regard to research traditions, that have silenced individuals? Close attention must be paid to matters of representation and retelling of stories (Dhunpath, 2000; Goodson, 1992).

*The nuance of representation.* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) wrote, what many consider, a classic essay on the problem of speaking for cultural others—*Can the subaltern speak?* According to Sharp (2008), Spivak's complex article has been interpreted in various ways. The premise of the article, according to Sharp (2008), was to discuss the problem of speaking for those whose cultural background is profoundly different from one's own. Spivak (1988) is critical of the self-assured, scientific method used by Western scholars' way of knowing the *other* (read non-Western). Scholars refer to the Westerner speaking for non-Westerners as epistemic violence or epistemicide, the damage done to the ways of knowing and understanding indigenous and non-Western cultures with regard to religion, science, philosophy, architecture, and governance (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Spivak, 1988).

As a result, Westerners—with profoundly different cultural backgrounds—have been purveyors of epistemicide, resulting in the marginalization and death of the subaltern voice and culture. As it pertains to educational research and praxis, I argue, epistemological imposition—epistemicide—is found across the educational landscape. Attempts to recover the subaltern voice by cultural outsiders and cultural insiders are not equivalent. Furthermore, cultural insiders should be mindful of the inevitability and dangers of essentialism. Such dangers highlight the difficulty of recovering “a voice for the subaltern without negating its heterogeneity” (Sharp, 2008, p. 114).

*The challenges of representation.* Representation has its limits. These limits include, and are not limited to, determining what information is relevant to include as a person's story. de Sousa Santos (2014) contends that once relevancy is established the phenomenon must be identified, detected, and recognized. Detection is the process by which traits or features in a phenomenon are defined. Recognition is the delineation of the parameters that guide the specific system of explanation or interpretation that the detected phenomena will be classified through (de Sousa



Santos, 2014). These strategies and processes are predisposed and inclined with the potential for abuse. In other words, researchers and historians chose to center specific aspects of their research, perhaps leaving out more valuable aspects, at least more valuable to its research participants. This inevitability occurs for various reasons, oftentimes partisan reasons such as adherence to political ideologies and discourses as well as racial, ethnic, and other alignments/misalignments.

*The value of representation.* Robert J. C. Young (2004) argued that “it was never the case that the subaltern could not speak: rather that the dominant would not listen” (p. 5). In spite of the complexities, nuances, and potential challenges of representation, Spivak (1988) acknowledges the value in speaking for the other by cultural *insiders*. This can be done with mutual boundary setting between cultural insiders and those they represent. In this way validity becomes built in. Temporary alliances and “strategic essentialism” with a clear image of identity as politics of opposition to fight for the rights of minoritized groups are appropriate (Sharp, 2008). In my experience, representation is common and welcomed in African American cultures and communities (we rep<sup>1</sup> where we are from, and we support those who rep us as well). This occurs in other minoritized communities experiencing and enduring Westernized Patriarchal paradigms. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argued, similarly, that many artists, musicians, and filmmakers try to capture moments of their people and employ representation as both a political concept and a form of expression. Also, Smith suggests that representation was a form of resistance to what has been imposed upon marginalized communities by those engaged in their epistemicide.

## Theory, Methodology, and the V Word

Tommy J. Curry (2017) provokes and challenges existing academic frameworks, theories, and research protocols that frame Black men and boys as historically and contemporarily equivalent to and striving toward Westernized models of Patriarchy. These academic frameworks persist in spite of a historical record of succumbing to and resisting Westernized Patriarchal violence and domination imposed upon Black men and boys. Furthermore, Curry argues that Black males’ and boys’ vulnerability, and struggles to navigate the paradigm of Westernized Patriarchal violence and White supremacy, is misaligned with the ways in which Black men and boys are framed in academic discourse and theory. Curry argues that Black men and boys, the pariahs of American society, rank at the bottom of every socio-economic, socio-political, and statistical category, including criminal justice, health care, and education. Curry’s analysis opposes academic framings and research methods related to Black males and boys and decries these as justification for Black male studies.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) urges developing new theories—theorizing methodologies—to understand those on the margins of society better. Anzaldúa (1990) argued for “theories that overlap many ‘worlds’” theorizing methods whose categories of analysis include race, class, gender, and ethnicity. These are theories “that will point

out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for patterns we uncover” (pp. xxv–xxvi). Similar to concerns raised by Curry (2017) and Anzaldúa (1990), I position life history methodology toward countering marginalization and deficit frameworks.

### *The Question of Validity*

What about validity? Many qualitative theorists have abandoned the concept of validity altogether due to its problematic assumption of a real world that can be judged by standards of objectivity (Dhunpath, 2000; Maxwell, 2013). Some, however, use the term “validity” without its implications of “objective truth” (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) thought of validity in a “fairly straightforward, common-sense way, to refer to the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation or other sort of account” (p. 122). Life history “challenges the notion of there being no ‘truth,’ but instead asserts that there exists a series of subjective views” (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 547).

In life history, the researcher’s own experience is a valid part of her/his own knowledge as long as it is subject to public and critical appraisal (Dhunpath, 2000). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that researchers who are also members of that community have to live and interact with those they study “on a day-to-day basis” (p. 137). Due to the level of collaboration between the researcher and participants, “seeking meaning and explanations together, respondent validation may well be built into the research design” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 36). “Validity is established by demonstrating that sociological explanation is congruent with the meanings through which members construct their realities and accomplish their everyday practical activities” (Jones, 1983, p. 152). As a member of the community under study, I am open to public criticism.

### **Conclusion**

Life history methodology is a worthy alternative for educational researchers concerned with social justice and equity. Life history provides researchers the space to collect and analyze data in a way that counters much of the traditional methodologies and methods in research. Contemporary educational research methodologies and methods are replete with historical baggage related to colonization and expansion, along with the violence and marginalization that those entailed. This history of colonization and marginalization is so pronounced that perhaps even social justice advocates, unknowingly, engage in research methods that reproduce the harms that they seek to disrupt.

For social justice advocates, life history methodology mandates that the insights, perspectives, and experiences of those experiencing injustice are the main sources of data. Life history provides real opportunities for educational researchers to develop new knowledge by listening to and validating the experiences of the most vulnerable populations. Life history challenges the idea of a universal truth—stemming from Eurocentric positionalities. Life history’s position as a counterculture leverages interventions into Westernization and White supremacy’s methodologies, theories, and discourses located throughout the educational landscape.

## Suggested Readings

Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Saskatoon, Canada: Purich Publishing.

Marie Battiste is an Indigenous woman tuned in to the plight of her ancestors. She is also Western educated and as such speaks with an authoritative *double consciousness*. As an educational administrator trying to improve educational opportunity for native students, Battiste provides important empirical perspectives aligning Western educational systems with coloniality.

Dhunpath, R. (2000). Life history methodology: “Narradigm” regained. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), 543–551. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390050156459>

Rubby Dhunpath discusses the increasing popularity of narratives/biographies in educational research. Yet, narratives/biographies are still delegitimized by the positivist/empiricist tradition and its artificial dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. This article proposes narrative/biographical research methodology and methods as a counterculture to *traditional* methods and examines the potential of narratives/biographies in understanding the lives of educators.

Gage, N. (1989). The paradigm wars and their aftermath a “historical” sketch of research on teaching since 1989. *Educational Researcher*, 18(7), 4–10. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X018007004>

Goodson, I., & Sikes, P. (2001). *Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives* (1st ed.). Buckingham, UK and Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Life history methodology has emerged in popularity with a variety of educational researchers and topics. This book explores and considers various reasons for this popularity and argues that life history methodology has a major and unique contribution in understanding schools, schooling, and educational experiences. The book uses examples of life history research to illustrate theoretical, methodological, ethical, and practical issues in education and in educational contexts.

Howe, K. R. (2008). Isolating science from the humanities: The third dogma of educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800408318302>

This article criticizes the quantitative/qualitative *dogmas* of educational research and the incompatibility, fact-value dichotomy premise. The author contends that no epistemological divide can be determined between the empirical sciences and the humanities. Furthermore, empirical research in education and the humanities' focus on values should not be disconnected.

## Note

1. Rep is shorthand for represent. A common discourse in Black, African American, and other minoritized communities.

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