

Book review

Davies, B. & Gannon, S. (2006). *Doing collective biography*.
Maidenhead: Open University Press.
Softcover A\$65 / NZ\$ 70 (incl. GST), Hardcover A\$165 / NZ\$180 (incl. GST)

Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon are editors and collaborative authors of this rich volume of work which further develops collective biography as an experimental form of writing that deliberately blurs the boundaries between experience and social research, and explores and responds to the ever present 'crisis' of representation. This book provides us with a long-awaited and focused discussion on the methodology of collective biography and also demonstrates how it is 'done'. Moving into the field of education and higher education, particular facets of the formation of institutional subjects are explored poignantly through this methodology. The rich and highly nuanced explorations of participants deliver fresh insights into the ways in which institutional practices and power relations create conditions of possibilities for school subjects and, in subsequent chapters, for those in academic environments to act in certain ways and to become certain kinds of persons one considers desirable. Drawing on poststructuralist and feminist scholars' work, such as Butler and Walkerdine, they further extend the work of Frigga Haug and also draw up guidelines for developing collective biography projects.

The book is written as part of a series called *Conducting Educational Research*, and is aimed at research students and academics undertaking social research. As someone entering post-graduate research I found the first chapter on the methodology of collective biography practices clear and easy to understand. Of particular interest to me was the notion of using this methodology to examine thoughts and practices that we usually take for granted and by so doing gain an understanding of how each of us contributes to the forming of a life. The idea of investigating how aspects of myself that I consider just to 'be' are actually created through my acceptance and rejection of discourses; that my agency and the potential to create new realities lie initially in my ability to see differently as a result of resisting subordination and later in my ability to deconstruct those discourses, are new and enlivening concepts to me for rethinking the possibilities of a life.

The first chapters' exploration of the experiences of the authors as school girls and the processes of subjectification they experienced in their schooling uncover the ways in which we both accept and reject discourses, and are shaped in doing so. The sharing and analysis of their memories of being a 'good' student prompted a new type of self reflection on my remembered identity of 'school girl' and provided a framework for reflecting on its role in the formation of my identity. Through their analysis I realised my desire to be appropriate in the classroom and to be good at what I did, involved me accepting a fictional sense of self. A self who was happy to comply with the adult rules as it gave me the recognition I sought of being 'good', whilst paradoxically feeling internally resentful of that adult authority because it incorrectly assumed I needed their external discipline. The authors' analysis of their memories led me to personal

reflections which brought a new understanding of the ways in which this process of voluntary subjectification and at the same time my internal opposition to it actually led me as a teacher to the development of a form of activism on behalf of the students in the classroom.

Another insight this sharing of stories provided in my understanding of the forming of a life was the awareness that my own experiences of subjectivity are shared in the stories of others. This understanding came through the memory stories of school girls conforming to be 'good' and the examples of subordination of the body to the mind to achieve this. My capacity to tune out to my body in service to my minds need to be 'appropriate' has been a significant part of my personal journey, leading to illness before the importance of the body became an acknowledged reality for me. To support our family during a time of unemployment for my husband, I re-entered casual teaching whilst trying to maintain my 'primary' role of breast feeding mother. At the end of a year I was completely unaware that I had lost ten kilograms and only vaguely aware that something wasn't right in my body. Most important to me was that I acted appropriately to support my family, and filled the role of 'mother' as I saw it. To read the commonality of this experience and see its roots in the lives of other school girls highlighted to me the shared nature of our vulnerabilities to discourse, my journey of pushing the body into submission began, as it did for the authors, in my experiences of being a schoolgirl.

Similarly, this shared nature of experience was highlighted in the third chapter of the book which looks at school girl reading heroes and deconstructs the part these characters play in forming the feminine character. A story shared about a father's caring response to his daughter's anxiety which led to the girl realising "I can trust my father to recognise me" (p43) brought tears to my eyes as I read, I knew the feelings of this girl. As I turned the page and read the next words where the authors reflected on how the actions of the father are still capable of "bringing tears to our eyes" I further realised my commonality with the experiences of these women.

Chapters four and five continue the work of looking into the conditions of possibility presented in a life, this time of academic women in the current context of neo-liberal workplaces. The imposition of the minds will on the body is a theme that is further explored in the memory stories, this time in the context of working within a discourse that advocates personal control, responsibility and flexibility thus seemingly providing freedom, but with an underlying message to achieve and consequently to never rest. The result of this is shared in the stories of stress related illnesses that came from pushing bodies into the background. The authors' deconstruction of this workplace discourse using collective biography techniques enabled me to connect personally with the possibilities available to the individual in this context. As someone entering the academic world I found great value in this exposition of the conditions of possibility that exist in the academic workplace and therefore, I begin my own experience with a 'new set of eyes'.

The success of a biography style book lies in its ability to draw the reader in to the experiences being described. As I read the shared memory stories the 'aliveness' of the

authors' embodied writing enabled me to live into the experiences, to feel the poignancy of their stories and to feel myself in their descriptions. I understood the ways in which these experiences formed their lives and thus understand more deeply the processes of my own life's formation. This book provided a new framework for me to understand the process of mutual formation and achieved the authors' aim of seeking "to understand our own contribution to creating and withholding the conditions of possibility of particular lives." (p182). I feel grateful to have read this innovative book as my introduction to the field of research methodology.

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