

WHO 'SPEAKS' AND FOR WHOM? APPROACHES TO (AND ALONG) WORKING WITH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MATERIALS IN HISTORY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH

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Autobiographical materials have often been employed in the history of education to explore questions around agency, experiences (such as of belonging), motivations and learning processes. As researchers, we might refer to individual and private testimonies such as diaries, letters and travelogues to gain insights into and ultimately build arguments around the historical lives of others.

Although working with autobiographical materials holds great possibilities, it is not without its limitations. Inspired by Spivak (1994), we must ask such critical questions as 'who speaks and for whom?' Reflections on canonical works arising from this methodology (e.g., Gerber 1997) remind us that this kind of source material represents a particular narrative, perhaps shaped by the identity politics of its era, paths to production and/or archival considerations. When working with autobiographical materials, then, we must consider the influences that shape which voices speak to us and in what ways, and, subsequently, which material we choose to draw from. This workshop seeks to address these questions, as well as their implications for the way we, as researchers, handle autobiographical materials.

Following a broad definition of autobiographical material as any kind of private testimony (diaries, letters, memoirs, interviews, photo albums, drawings and so forth), this workshop seeks to inspire conversations around themes that relate to this topic, including but not limited to the following:

1. Whose autobiographical materials do we have, and – importantly – whose do we not? How might this be shaped by race, gender, social class, sexuality and country of origin (particularly in colonial contexts), among other factors? Reflecting on who may have experienced barriers to producing such materials (see, e.g., Vincent 1982) leads us to consider issues of multi-level intersectionality that are radically entangled with questions of access to education.
2. Under what circumstances were the materials that we do have, produced? How might such factors as the editorial hand, censorship and even self-censorship have shaped a text? With documents such as interviews, how might the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, the nature of memory, the gap between what is said and what is meant, and issues around the production of transcripts affect the materials with which we work (see, e.g., Thompson 1988)? A critical analysis of the conditions around the production of private testimonies can enable researchers to gain insights into various motives, agendas and strategies behind these sources.
3. How might the questions above also link to questions of material preservation? We must consider the actors involved. Who decides to deposit which material in an archive, library or collection? Who decides to accept that material and who is granted access to it for research purposes – and, critically, what motivates their actions? Thus, we consider archives to be “reflections of existing power relationships” (Alexander 2012: 132) that function as ‘gatekeepers’ through their “power to exclude” (Carter 2006: 216).
4. Why, given the challenges above, do we still work with autobiographical materials? What theoretical and methodological implications for educational and historical research arise from this? What is our own positionality as researchers – not only as part of ‘those-for-whom-the-voices-

exist' (Schechner 1985: 5f.) but also as subjective selves whose own biases and histories influence our gazes and interpretations (Fischer-Lichte 2002)? As we, too, are inextricably embedded in the inclusion and exclusion of historical voices, we must practice critical reflexivity.

In order to raise and discuss issues around the above-mentioned themes, this workshop will be constructed around two main activities:

- 1) Moderated discussions of theoretical, methodological and methodical issues. Short texts or other media in English that deal with relevant concerns will be distributed to participants prior to the workshop. These are meant to provide a common ground for the discussions.
- 2) Short presentations in English that reflect upon researchers' own experiences with autobiographical materials. Our aim is for these presentations to evoke a debate by raising more questions than answers.

Since our aim is to evoke debates based on short presentations, registered participants will be invited to submit abstracts (250 words max.) highlighting their current projects, challenges and methodologies as they relate to the aforementioned themes. We anticipate that this workshop will be a fruitful one, not only in thinking through the ways that we handle autobiographical materials but also in building networks between those of us who do.

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