

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

Special Issue Editors: Karen Lillie (UCL Institute of Education), Lisbeth Matzer (a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School), Lilli Riettiens (University of Cologne)

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 special issue 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), the special issue seeks to inspire arguments 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.

We invite especially – but not exclusively – early career researchers to contribute to the special issue and to send us an abstract or short outline of their proposed paper as well as a short bio (3 sentences) to karen.lillie@ucl.ac.uk by 15th of September 2019. We will inform contributors by the end of September of acceptance and of further steps.

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Karen Lillie is a PhD student at the UCL Institute of Education, working with Prof. Gary McCulloch and Prof. Martin Mills. Her ESRC-supported research applies historical and sociological approaches to the in-depth study of one economically elite, international secondary school in Switzerland. She seeks to understand the economic, social and political re-positioning of this institution over the second half of the 20th century, as well as how its students, emplaced within this analysis, forge multi-sited understandings of themselves and the school.

Lisbeth Matzer is a contemporary historian and currently a fellow in the MSCA-program “EHumanities” at the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities Cologne. Under the supervision of Prof. Habbo Knoch, PD Heidemarie Uhl and Prof. Elke Kleinau her ongoing PhD project focuses on National Socialist practices of youth organization in Austria and Slovenia with an emphasis on the cross-border relations during the German occupation of the latter.

Lilli Riettiens is a research associate at the professorship for *History of Education and Gender History* under the direction of Prof. Dr. Elke Kleinau at the University of Cologne. She is undertaking doctoral research into the mutual constitutive and transformative entanglement of body, space and time, as it is reflected in travelogues that were written during and after transatlantic journeys in the late 19th and early 20th century. Her working topics are History of Education, Postcolonial Studies and (Historic) Praxeology.

Contacts: Karen.lillie.15@ucl.ac.uk, lmatzer@uni-koeln.de, L.Riettiens@uni-koeln.de