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Testing the potential of auto/biographical life history

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Testing the potential of auto/biographical life history

Purpose: In this paper I describe a methodological experiment designed to test the potential of an auto/biographical (Stanley, 1992) **life history**. Could it serve a purpose for which it was not originally intended? Specifically, I consider the extent to which a life history articulates with the literature on migration, even though it was not written for this purpose.

Design/methodology/approach: I consider this issue via a series of four narrative vignettes representing the story of this experiment.

Findings: I found that the life history does more than articulate with the migration literature on conceptual distinction. It also animates, supplements and interrogates theories therein about the utility and futility of making distinctions. In this respect the experiment has been a success.

Limitations: This paper has not explicitly engaged with the ethics and politics of employing life history in ways for which it was not intended.

Originality/value: This paper is making a methodological contribution to the area of qualitative research and suggests that multiple analyses might perhaps make life history more attractive to funders

Introduction

In this paper I describe a methodological experiment (Oakley, 1998, 2000a, 2000b) designed to test the potential of an auto/biographical (Stanley, 1992) **life history, where the slash interrupts the flow of the word and 'might have the effect of making the reader pause to consider issues of authorship and voice' (Parker 1998, p. 117)**. Could it serve a purpose for which it was not originally intended?

I consider this question via a series of four narrative vignettes which represent the story of this experiment. The first vignette provides some of the background and context that served as its impetus. Here I focus specifically on the dominance of discourses of migration that transform people into objects of fear or pity, and therefore as deserving or less deserving of support. The second vignette is the lynchpin of the paper. In it I give an account of my methodology which includes an explication of the particular life history genres to which I subscribe, paying particular attention to their antecedent informants and ethical challenges. The third takes the form of the **life history** about my parents, extracted from **another life history** about my education and its contribution to the construction of my researcher identity.

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3 My parents had come to work in the textile mills of Huddersfield after the Second World War,
4 my mother (mam) as an economic migrant and my father (dad) as a displaced person.
5
6 Although this paper is making a methodological contribution to the area of qualitative
7
8 research, rather than substantive contribution to the migration literature, in the final vignette I
9
10 set out how the excavated **life history** about my parents articulates with some of the writing
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12 on conceptual distinction to be found in the academic literature on migration. This serves as
13
14 a **reference point and** measure of the success of the experiment.
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16

17 **Background and context**

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19 Throughout the summer of 2015 I became increasingly concerned about the way in which
20
21 differentiation between various groups of people in the dominant discourses on migration
22
23 was not only describing but *producing and constructing* distinctions (Morley and Taylor,
24
25 2012; Taylor 2014) and, as a consequence, narratives of deservedness. However, I was also
26
27 aware that simply adopting one term over another did not address the underpinning
28
29 mechanisms of meaning attribution. For example Merriam Webster defines migration
30
31 neutrally as 'to move from one country, place, or locality to another' ([http://www.merriam-](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/migrate)
32
33 [webster.com/dictionary/migrate](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/migrate)) and yet 'migrant' has now 'mutated into a pejorative term'
34
35 (Rovisco, 2015). Likewise, Aljazeera's adoption of the overarching term 'refugee' when
36
37 reporting on the humanitarian crisis that had developed in the Mediterranean, reinforced
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39 narratives of deservedness because it drew on stock stories (Seal 2010) and pre-figurative
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41 storylines (Goodson, 2013) which left intact the use of conceptual distinction as a weapon in
42
43 political armouries.
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47 As I considered these issues I started to connect my thinking to an unpublished story
48
49 I wrote in 2006 about my educational life history, which was intended as a reflexive
50
51 engagement with the assumptions I was bringing to the start of what I hoped was going to be
52
53 a long career as a researcher. I had not anticipated that the influence of my parents,
54
55 migrants to the UK, would be prominent in this narrative but this turned out to be the case.
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57 Because mam had been an economic migrant to the UK and dad a displaced person, I
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3 wondered whether this account could contribute to understanding this distinction, despite the
4 fact it was not conceived with this purpose in mind. I decided to test the possibility of
5 undertaking a secondary analysis of my narrative.
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7

8 9 **Methodology**

10 Before I deal with the mechanics of constructing the life story at the heart of this paper it is
11 important to clarify that life history is not a unified concept. **Tierney (2000)** contends that
12 those doing life history tend to talk past each other rather than argue (**p. 539**) and, in setting
13 out my understanding of what life history does and what it might do, I am merely elucidating
14 my position rather than staking a privileged claim in the space of life history.
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23 **What do I mean by life history?**

24 In my view life history research attends not only to the life stories of the individuals
25 concerned, but also to the meaning of those stories in their wider historical, social, political,
26 cultural and geographical contexts. Bertaux (1981) contends therefore that life stories may
27 be contained in life histories but not vice versa. This creates a clear conceptual space
28 between life history research and life story research. Goodson & Sikes (2001) maintain that
29 'the life story individualizes and personalizes, the life history contextualizes and politicizes'
30 pp. 87–88). This is not to denigrate the personal story. Indeed Goodson argues that starting
31 with the personal story is absolutely crucial and cites the persistent failure of educational
32 reform as the result of 'ignorance or denial of personal missions and biographical mandates'.
33 He further states that these 'seem a good place to locate our studies (and indeed our
34 policies) not reluctantly at the end of a process, but enthusiastically at the beginning
35 (Goodson, 2014, p. 1)'.
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49 **Nor am I suggesting that life stories are immaculate conceptions, divorced from**
50 **the contexts in which they are produced or that they are devoid of the influence of**
51 **those contexts. Recasting personal stories as something other than life histories**
52 **serves instead to re-configure the work that they each do and asks different questions**
53 **of the role of structure and agency in a person's life.**
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3 **Wright Mills** (1959) provided the underpinning rationale for use of life history. He
4 maintains that the 'sociological imagination' 'enables its possessor to understand the larger
5 historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of
6 individuals' (p.5). He also states that it 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the
7 relations between the two within society' (p.6). If we do this we will start to understand how
8 'personal troubles' become 'public issues' (p.226). The sociological imagination therefore not
9 only provides a way of researching inner life and external career. It evokes a biography-
10 history-society nexus that is concentrated on the dynamic and relational. It is for this reason
11 that life history can constitute the 'perfect type of sociological material' (Thomas and
12 Znaniecki 1918-20, p. 1832). **It is significant here that one of the earliest sociological**
13 **uses of life histories was of Polish peasants migrating to the United States,**
14 **suggesting that there life history itself can be used to explore issues of migration. The**
15 **question in the paper is a different one, however, in that I was concerned to test**
16 **whether a life history about could be used in this way if that had not been its original**
17 **purpose.**

33 **Method**

34 My aim in revisiting the original life history narrative was of a different order to that described
35 by Ellis (2009) who used a return to previous writings as an opportunity to question and
36 challenge earlier versions of events in her life from the perspective of the present' (p. 12). My
37 aim was to test how **life history** could be put to work. Once written must it be discarded? Is it
38 applicable only to the purpose for which it was conceived? Unlike Ellis therefore I have not
39 revised my original writing in the light of the passage of time and through the lens of the
40 present, although there is bound to be a temporal bearing on what I have written.

41 In order to construct a life history of my parent's story I first isolated all passages in
42 the original that related to my parents. I made few changes to the extracted passages,
43 sufficient only to retain the integrity of the whole after removing passages about myself that
44 did not contribute to my parents' story. I added more detail about the circumstances under
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3 which my parents came to Huddersfield but this amounted to very little and is descriptive in
4
5 nature. Despite my parents both being inveterate story-tellers, they invariably presented
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7 themselves to their children as parents (Goffman, 1990). They did not consider it appropriate,
8
9 or necessary, to share other aspects of themselves with their offspring. My knowledge about
10
11 my parents' lives before they lived together is scant, cobbled together from bits of paper we
12
13 found after they died, from eavesdropped conversations and from secrets revealed by others
14
15 once they had died and it 'didn't matter'.
16

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18 I then analysed the life history narrative in the light of some recent literature on the
19
20 distinction between different groups of migrants and assessed to what extent it might
21
22 contribute to this literature, even though it had not been conceived with this purpose in mind.
23
24 The success of the experiment might be evaluated in terms of the nature and extent of its
25
26 contribution to this literature
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28 ***Ethical considerations***

29
30 The ethical ramifications of my methodology make themselves known to me through my
31
32 reluctance to characterise what I am doing as 'secondary analysis of data' which is too
33
34 detached a term for what I was undertaking. Sayer (2011) maintains that most people 'are
35
36 sentient, *evaluative beings*: we don't just think and interact but evaluate things including the
37
38 past and the future' (Sayer, 2011, p. 1, original emphasis). And yet social science has a habit
39
40 of disregarding this evaluative relationship, turning instead to 'concepts such as convention,
41
42 habit, discourses, socialization, reciprocity, exchange, discipline, power and a host of others'
43
44 that produce 'an anodyne account of living that renders our evident concern about what we
45
46 do and what happens to us incomprehensible' (Sayer 2011. p. 2).
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49 In research terms there is no ethical reason I should not re-analyse this data. Both my
50
51 parents died years ago. Their informed consent is no longer necessary. My siblings are not
52
53 present in my narrative, except in a tangential way. This exclusion/omission may address
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55 some critiques of personal life writing which rightly interrogate the ethics of implicating others
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57 by association (Tolich, 2004; 2010), but it also leaves my version of my parents' story
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3 untroubled by their (my siblings') interpretations. Regardless of how institutional ethics would
4 view my methodology, I would say it raises trenchant moral issues. It is not simply as Kuhn
5 (2002) summarises, that 'memory never provides access to or represents the past 'as it was''
6 and that 'the activity of remembering is far from neutral' (p.157). Nor is it that remembering
7 my parents is still both painful and comforting. Nor is it that I find it difficult to achieve critical
8 distance from something to which I am so emotionally attached. The reason/emotion
9 dichotomy makes little sense to me, and Sayer (2011) contends that it is only one of a
10 number of conceits of eighteenth century thinking, despites its orthodox status, Conversely,
11 Nussbaum's (2001) view of emotions as 'upheavals of thought' does resonate with my
12 experiences.
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17 Remembering my parents *is*, an 'almost visceral engagement' (Kuhn 2002, p.155),
18 but the reason it evokes concerns of a moral nature is due in no small part to my self-
19 identification as a 'feminist researcher'. **I mean a number of things by this, but my guiding**
20 **principles are derived from Bhavnani's (1993) engagement with Haraway's (1988)**
21 **discussion of what 'feminist objectivity' might mean.** Among **these principles** is a
22 responsibility not to re-inscribe people into prevailing representations. But at the same time it
23 comprises a commitment not to valorise or romanticise them (Bhavnani, 1993). It also
24 involves cognizance of the macro political settings in which research is conducted, which is
25 in tune with life history methodology in which both story and context share primacy. However,
26 most trenchant of all is Skeggs' (2002) criticism that the 'techniques of telling also rely on
27 accruing the stories of others in order to make them property for oneself' (p. 349). It
28 sometimes seems that academic labour entails a choice between being a good researcher,
29 *or a good daughter, or a good feminist.*
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50 **Have you heard the one about the economic migrant and a displaced person?**

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52 My trust in stories to explain as well as describe (Goodson, 2013, 2014) is due in no small
53 part to my parents. Their lives could be storied in two halves – before and after the Second
54 World War, before and after they settled in Huddersfield. I saw them living their efforts to
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3 maintain a coherent sense of their own selves and their own identities in the context of that
4
5 brutal rupture.

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7 I do not have the authority to tell my parents' stories and yet without theirs mine is
8
9 meaningless. So the appropriation of their stories speaks volumes about my own education
10
11 journey. I tell their stories to strangers when they insisted on keeping them private,
12
13 sometimes within their immediate family, but often just between themselves. With the
14
15 passage of time I don't keep these stories quiet because I think they contribute to a 'greater
16
17 good', but I would not deny the moral issues re-telling them raises.

18
19 My thoughts and feelings about and approach to research have their heart in the love
20
21 and respect I deeply feel for my parents as people (I judge them more harshly as parents).
22
23 They lived, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, as historical beings within the structures
24
25 and institutions in which they found themselves. I agree with **Wright Mills** that 'the larger
26
27 institutions within which life is enacted... on occasion bear upon it more grievously than do
28
29 the intimate environments of childhood' (1959, p.12) and being born to these people at this
30
31 time, in those circumstances conspired to make 'the family' both a refuge and a prison and
32
33 the site of most of the fundamental things I learned about the world. It is by far the most
34
35 significant contribution to my educational story. So I have to tell this story, I have to own what
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37 Redwood (2008) calls the violence it does. And my parents would be both angry and proud
38
39 that I relate what they would have suppressed. It is a privilege of the education they both
40
41 highly prized and summarily dismissed. 'Letters after your name' elicited both reverence and
42
43 disdain – such a person, though obviously 'a highly intelligent fellow (sic)' had clearly 'never
44
45 done a day's work in their lives'.

46
47 The Second World War, with my parents acting as a conduit, is the historical event
48
49 within which I have to contextualise my life. This is not to imply determinism. Conversations
50
51 with my siblings highlight that we all focused on quite different things and processed and
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53 interpreted our observations in different ways. But we were all 'the children of immigrants'
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55 regardless of how we then came to deal with that. And we all still occupy that postmodern
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3 phenomenon of the 'liminal space' and have trouble with monolithic and static identities
4 reflecting national and ethnic oscillations and mediations personified in my parents.
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6
7 Dad was an ethnic Serb from Croatia. He came to England as a 'displaced person' at
8 the end of the 1940s. He could speak English well enough to have been employed as a
9 teacher/interpreter when he first arrived, although where he learned the language is a
10 mystery because I know he received only a primary education, leaving school at eleven.
11 Likewise I am unaware of the circumstances that meant he, his father and two brothers were
12 able to come to England instead of being forcibly 'repatriated' (Tolstoy, 1986). I do know why
13 dad came to Huddersfield to work in the mills. His parents had been peasant farmers and he
14 had been charged with taking the goats up to the high mountain pastures in summer,
15 remaining there for days, sometimes weeks according to his own accounts. It produced in
16 him a lifetime loathing of the countryside. Dad was sociable and not made for the isolation of
17 village life in rural Croatia. He enjoyed the camaraderie of the mills and, perhaps inured by
18 his childhood experiences, could tolerate the heat, noise and dust, something I could not on
19 the rare occasions I went to see him at work. Dad became a 'naturalised' British citizen
20 before I was born. He went to church. Although it was a long haul he bought a house and he
21 sent money to family in Croatia and Serbia. His only regret about leaving his village and
22 coming to England was that he did not see his mother again, having left his village aged
23 sixteen.
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41 Mam was an economic migrant. She had two children aged seven and eight at the
42 time and 'no man to support' her. Food, let alone work or money, was scarce in post-war,
43 land-locked Austria and she arrived in Huddersfield in 1953, aged twenty-seven, to work as a
44 mender in the textile industry. England was an obvious destination for mam. She had
45 attended the equivalent of grammar school in Austria and spoke English to a good standard,
46 and there was a shortage of workers to fuel the post-war economic recovery. I still have a
47 group of friends I went to grammar school with. Of the seven of us, five had mothers who
48 were menders in the textile industry. So this was a major source of employment for working
49 class women at the time.
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3 Helping Britain out of a hole was not so much on mam's mind, however. She was
4 helping her own family out of its own hole. Her mender's wages supported herself, her
5 mother, her younger brother and her two children. I suspect the start of her problematic
6 relationship with food can be traced here and she mentioned often that sometimes she would
7 not eat from one day to the next. Mam enjoyed the work she did, she was proud that it was a
8 'skilled job' and that she could earn more than dad did as a warper. Mending was exclusively
9 'women's work', reflecting the gendered belief that women's 'natural' manual dexterity made
10 them suitable for the painstakingly fine work entailed in rectifying the often tiny imperfections
11 that occur in the production of 'pieces' of fine woollen worsted cloth.
12

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14
15 Mam registered as an 'alien' under the Aliens Order of 1920, which meant she had to
16 regularly report to the local police station. The last entry in her Certificate of Registration is
17 October 1959, after I was born. So I can legitimately claim that one of my parents at least
18 was an alien, something for which I am inordinately grateful (hooks, 2000). When her mother
19 died she brought her children and brother to England and they moved in with dad (would
20 they have stayed together otherwise?). I didn't know that my parents hadn't married until
21 1974, when I was fifteen, until I went through papers after they died and found a marriage
22 certificate. I also found a booking for the register office dated September 1959, just a couple
23 of months after I was born, but I will never know why they didn't keep the appointment, nor
24 why they finally decided to marry after all. Rubin's (1972/1992) research on working class
25 families in the US and Steedman's (2000) on the Poor Laws in England set out why it was in
26 some cases vital to stay quiet. Their relationship was by turns volatile and moribund and their
27 frequent arguments re-enacted, often explicitly, the Serbian struggles (dad) against Austro-
28 Hungarian imperialism (mam).
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32 My mother never became a British citizen and her children had 'dual nationality' but
33 she tried her very best to make sure we fitted in as English, even though she wanted us to be
34 Austrian. Dad took it for granted that we would be part of a Serbian cultural tradition even
35 though he was exceedingly proud of his British citizenship and relieved that he was working
36 in a textile mill instead of being a farmer, which would have been his lot had he not been
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3 displaced. He had not factored in mam's fierce opposition. He persisted for a while but by the
4
5 time I went to grammar school and could make my own choices the path of least resistance
6
7 was taken until our connection with our Serbian heritage was all but forgotten. However, for
8
9 reasons I little understand, when I had children it became a matter of some importance that
10
11 they were christened in a Serbian Orthodox church. All the 'third generation' cousins have
12
13 gone on to engage with their Serbian identity to a far greater degree than I or my siblings did,
14
15 a difficult undertaking for them in the light of the recent history of the former Yugoslavia.

16
17 This does not mean I felt 'English'. I did not identify with those boisterous, noisy
18
19 confident children at primary school. I knew nothing of their games and nursery rhymes –
20
21 and they knew nothing of mine. Our prayers were said in Serbo-Croat and German. I had
22
23 never sung a hymn. One year we learned Silent Night in German for a carol concert – I didn't
24
25 tell that I already knew it.

26
27 I was always aware that my parents were 'different' and their children were 'different'
28
29 by association. Dark-skinned ('dusky', as one, short-lived, boyfriend pointed out), dark-haired
30
31 apart from my youngest sister who took after mam, we were a larger than average family
32
33 who ate 'foreign' food in cramped conditions, a shifting population of never less than six
34
35 people in a house with two bedrooms, making sporadic and incoherent attempts to fit in. A
36
37 few years ago I read Alan Bennett's (2005) story of his parents and I was struck by the
38
39 similarities (Bennett calls his mother mam as well). I wondered then how significant their
40
41 'foreign-ness' was to their difference.

42
43 Despite her attempts at 'normalising' the family, mam was all too aware of the futility
44
45 of trying to fit in. The pendulum regularly swung back and we would be exhorted to 'keep
46
47 ourselves to ourselves'. For many years I felt frustrated by the energy it took to dissemble
48
49 and I often blamed mam for her controlling ways. Later, reading about how families would
50
51 come to be known as poor and would attract the attentions of the state once they could no
52
53 longer keep their stories to themselves (Vincent 1991) I better understood the double bind of
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55 being poor. Tell your story and risk losing control of your life, or succumb to secrecy. I feel
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57 extremely sorry now for blaming my mother and I am fully in agreement with Reay (2005)
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3 and Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) that class is felt in psychic as well as structural
4 ways and with Andrew Sayer (2005) that it also has moral significance. More recently still, I
5 wonder if mam's anxiety was also to do with her status as an Austrian national.
6
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8 9 10 **Discusson: My parents' story and the academic literature on migration**

11 The experiment began proper when I set out to ascertain whether, and if so how, the
12 excavated life history account about my parents articulated with the academic literature on
13 migration. This would then inform my evaluation of, and provide a measure for, the success
14 of the experiment. Initially I planned to identify themes in the literature and then return to the
15 life history to evaluate the extent and nature of its contribution to this literature. However, the
16 size and range of the extant literature was not conducive to this process and I reversed the
17 direction of my analysis, starting with motifs, that I identified in the **life history** and looking for
18 their articulation in the migration literature. I also limited myself to writings on conceptual
19 distinction because, firstly, the debate was topical (Papadopoulos, 2015; Rovisco, 2015;
20 Taylor, 2015), but secondly because the issue of conceptual distinction between groups of
21 migrating peoples is an overarching one, embedded in the problem of how to theorise
22 migration itself (Castles, 2010; Feller, 2005; Koser and Martin 2011).
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36 It was not the case therefore that I approached the literature in innocence. On my
37 own analysis my parents' story indicated the futility of making distinctions and highlighted the
38 complexity of meaning contained within particular terminologies. But it is worth noting that the
39 issues I identified are located across a range of fields such as migration studies, citizenship
40 studies and refugee studies and within particular disciplines, primarily sociology (Castles,
41 2003, 2010), history (Long, 2013), law (Karatani, 2005) and philosophy (Shacknove, 1985),
42 where they tend to be treated in different ways (Brettel and Hollifield, 2009). Therefore I was
43 not aiming for meta-analysis, but to determine whether the motifs in my parents' story had
44 been taken up anywhere in the literature and whether they added to or refined any of the
45 analyses across this range of writings.
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3 The first motif I sought in the literature was whether there was a prevalent view on the
4 possibility (and wisdom) of distinguishing between economic migrants and displaced persons
5 or refugees. In general most arguments supported Long (2013) who states that the weight of
6 empirical and historical evidence, among which I also include my parents' story, falls in
7 favour of the erasure of distinctions between different types of migration. The second motif I
8 looked for were reasons why it might be necessary to make distinctions. Hathaway (2007) for
9 example argues in respect of the distinction between refugees and internally displaced
10 peoples (IDPs), but the argument is generally applicable, that distinctions are necessary in
11 order to protect the status of refugees in law. Hathaway's arguments have, however, been
12 robustly countered (Cohen, 2007; DeWind, 2007; Bakewell, 2011). In terms of my parents'
13 story it is difficult to comprehend how the law protected or exposed my father to a greater
14 degree than it did my mother. They each in their own way used the law as a shelter and saw
15 it as a threat. Because dad was naturalised he was probably afforded greater protection than
16 mam. But he rarely left Huddersfield, let alone the UK, and he never returned to what was
17 then Yugoslavia. His efforts to maintain his Serbian-ness were realised instead in his
18 commitment to his church, his weekly meetings with his brothers and his friends, and in a
19 myriad other cultural and social activities in which he tried, ultimately in vain, to involve us.
20 His efforts set him on a collision course with mam, whose protection in the face of the law
21 she vested in her children. But again this played out in nuanced ways. We had Austrian
22 nationality as well as British, but she was genuinely anxious that nothing we said or did
23 outside the domain of the family home should mark us out as 'different'.
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45 The third motif I looked for was the notion of deservedness. The question I was
46 asking of the story was whether mam, as an economic migrant, was less deserving of being
47 in England than dad as a displaced person. On my reading, my parents' life history reflected
48 not only the challenge of answering this question but also the difficulty of defining the criteria
49 for evaluating deservedness. Although mam was an economic migrant, a category currently
50 at the 'undeserving' end of the spectrum, Austrians were starving after the war and she had
51 four people to support financially. The issue of repatriation renders the issue more
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3 straightforward for dad because a return 'home' would almost certainly have meant death,
4
5 but it is important to understand that my father did not articulate his coming to England in
6
7 these terms. For example, he told me once that the reason he did not go to the USA was
8
9 simply that applications to the UK were being processed more quickly. Moreover, dad, even
10
11 as a displaced person had a degree of choice and freedom from responsibility that was not
12
13 salient in mam's case. As both my parents also worked equally as long and conscientiously
14
15 in an industry that was short of labour it might be said that my parents' story, rather than
16
17 providing a definitive answer to the question of deservedness, serves to highlight the fact
18
19 that, at the very least, it is not a monolithic construction.

20
21 Defining deservedness is also a theme in the migration literature. Long (2013), for
22
23 example, highlights its historical contingency, foregrounding the way in which its meaning is
24
25 liable to shifts over time. However, she also maintains that the 'tangled history of refugee and
26
27 migrant identities' has been neglected (2013, p. 4), and she alludes to the 'ahistoricism' of
28
29 migration studies. By attending to how and why refugee as a distinct category was
30
31 *constructed* (p.6, emphasis added), 'not least to avoid any assumption that it represents the
32
33 "natural" or "obvious" conclusion of earlier debates' (p.6), she foregrounds 'the fluid and
34
35 changing understandings of poverty, persecution and protection that international policy-
36
37 makers employed in developing regimes to govern both refugees and migrants during the
38
39 inter-war period' (p.6). She contends that this led to the separation of refugee and migrant
40
41 identities, despite the fact that research 'findings have shown persuasively that "refugee" and
42
43 "migrant" flows are often interconnected with communities, families and even individuals
44
45 shifting between these different policy categories'.

46
47 The notion of deservedness is to my mind entangled in ideas about agency, which
48
49 was the fourth motif I looked for in the literature. In practice, the interplay of agency with
50
51 structural factors often creates a theoretical 'impasse' in migration theory (Bakewell, 2010).
52
53 My parents' stories, conversely, serve to *animate* theory based on the dynamics of structure
54
55 and agency. For example, the nature of mam's migration was further complicated by the fact
56
57 she was from Austria, an 'enemy' of the UK. This may have accounted to some extent for her
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3 reluctance to become involved in any activities outside the home that might draw attention to
4 our connection to this fact, and why I did not reveal that I could sing Silent Night in German.
5
6 Nevertheless it was the early 1970s before she could stop painting over the swastikas that
7
8 would appear on our gate posts. However, she spoke good English and the UK was short of
9
10 workers; workers, moreover, who could do 'women's work'. England was therefore an
11
12 obvious choice for her. Her decision was also mediated through her embodied-ness, as the
13
14 most able of the four other members of her Austrian family.

15
16
17 I found that this life history resonated particularly with Bakewell's (2011) analysis that
18
19 a failure to conceptually unpack the terms refugee, migrant and IDP has led to confusion and
20
21 a failure to get to grips with what these terms actually mean. Hence any attempt to
22
23 distinguish between different groups is unproductive (p. 14). He argues that these terms can
24
25 be 'used in at least three different senses - as a process, condition or category' (p. 19). He
26
27 goes on to state that 'While it may be correct to say that refugees are not migrants (seen as
28
29 categories), this does not mean refugees cannot become migrants (as a condition) or that
30
31 displacement cannot be usefully analysed as a form of migration (as a process)' (p.25). In
32
33 short the distinctions to be made are not among categories but in the mechanisms of
34
35 categorisation itself. Moreover, the relationships between each of these senses of the word
36
37 are not static and indicate the historical dynamic between the changing meaning of the
38
39 category 'refugee' and processes of migration for example (Elie, 2010).
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43 **Conclusion**

44
45 The account presented here can give only a flavour of the lengthy process I undertook in
46
47 testing my/parents' **life history**. Nevertheless it does support my conclusion that my/parents'
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49 story does more than articulate with the migration literature on conceptual distinction. It also
50
51 animates, supplements and interrogates theories therein about the utility and futility of
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53 distinguishing between migrants and refugees. In this respect the experiment has been a
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55 success.
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3 However, this paper has not explicitly engaged with the ethics and politics of
4 employing life history in ways for which it was not intended. What might this mean for life
5 history research? How does the potential for secondary analysis of a life history written for
6 another purpose change perceptions of its 'relevance' in a climate where the promotion of
7 'big data', 'value for money', quantifiable 'impact' and 'public engagement' rather than public
8 service are to the fore? On the one hand life history research is time consuming and does
9 not purport to generalisability. The possibility of multiple analyses might, perhaps make it
10 more attractive to funders. But what is at stake for life history if it becomes entangled in the
11 politics of research in this way? What, moreover, are the ethical ramifications? What are
12 participants agreeing to? How far are others who are implicated in life histories, such as my
13 siblings, to be considered if life histories are to be scrutinised in different arenas, each with
14 their own values, philosophies, even paradigms? Although they have always been at the
15 back of my mind, these are trenchant questions that I have not been able to engage with
16 here. Therefore I end on a cautious note, with the recommendation to focus on these
17 questions in the next stage of the experiment.
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Testing the potential of auto/biographical life history

Purpose: In this paper I describe a methodological experiment designed to test the potential of an auto/biographical (Stanley, 1992) life history. Could it serve a purpose for which it was not originally intended? Specifically, I consider the extent to which a life history articulates with the literature on migration, even though it was not written for this purpose.

Design/methodology/approach: I consider this issue via a series of four narrative vignettes representing the story of this experiment.

Findings: I found that the life history does more than articulate with the migration literature on conceptual distinction. It also animates, supplements and interrogates theories therein about the utility and futility of making distinctions. In this respect the experiment has been a success.

Limitations: This paper has not explicitly engaged with the ethics and politics of employing life history in ways for which it was not intended.

Originality/value: This paper is making a methodological contribution to the area of qualitative research and suggests that multiple analyses might perhaps make life history more attractive to funders

Introduction

In this paper I describe a methodological experiment (Oakley, 1998, 2000a, 2000b) designed to test the potential of an auto/biographical (Stanley, 1992) life history, where the slash interrupts the flow of the word and 'might have the effect of making the reader pause to consider issues of authorship and voice' (Parker 1998, p. 117). Could it serve a purpose for which it was not originally intended?

I consider this question via a series of four narrative vignettes which represent the story of this experiment. The first vignette provides some of the background and context that served as its impetus. Here I focus specifically on the dominance of discourses of migration that transform people into objects of fear or pity, and therefore as deserving or less deserving of support. The second vignette is the lynchpin of the paper. In it I give an account of my methodology which includes an explication of the particular life history genres to which I subscribe, paying particular attention to their antecedent informants and ethical challenges. The third takes the form of the life history about my parents, extracted from another life history about my education and its contribution to the construction of my researcher identity.

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3 My parents had come to work in the textile mills of Huddersfield after the Second World War,
4 my mother (mam) as an economic migrant and my father (dad) as a displaced person.
5
6 Although this paper is making a methodological contribution to the area of qualitative
7
8 research, rather than substantive contribution to the migration literature, in the final vignette I
9
10 set out how the excavated life history about my parents articulates with some of the writing
11
12 on conceptual distinction to be found in the academic literature on migration. This serves as
13
14 a reference point and measure of the success of the experiment.
15
16

17 **Background and context**

18
19 Throughout the summer of 2015 I became increasingly concerned about the way in which
20
21 differentiation between various groups of people in the dominant discourses on migration
22
23 was not only describing but *producing and constructing* distinctions (Morley and Taylor,
24
25 2012; Taylor 2014) and, as a consequence, narratives of deservedness. However, I was also
26
27 aware that simply adopting one term over another did not address the underpinning
28
29 mechanisms of meaning attribution. For example Merriam Webster defines migration
30
31 neutrally as 'to move from one country, place, or locality to another' ([http://www.merriam-](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/migrate)
32
33 [webster.com/dictionary/migrate](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/migrate)) and yet 'migrant' has now 'mutated into a pejorative term'
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35 (Rovisco, 2015). Likewise, Aljazeera's adoption of the overarching term 'refugee' when
36
37 reporting on the humanitarian crisis that had developed in the Mediterranean, reinforced
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39 narratives of deservedness because it drew on stock stories (Seal 2010) and pre-figurative
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41 storylines (Goodson, 2013) which left intact the use of conceptual distinction as a weapon in
42
43 political armouries.
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47 As I considered these issues I started to connect my thinking to an unpublished story
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49 I wrote in 2006 about my educational life history, which was intended as a reflexive
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51 engagement with the assumptions I was bringing to the start of what I hoped was going to be
52
53 a long career as a researcher. I had not anticipated that the influence of my parents,
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55 migrants to the UK, would be prominent in this narrative but this turned out to be the case.
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57 Because mam had been an economic migrant to the UK and dad a displaced person, I
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3 wondered whether this account could contribute to understanding this distinction, despite the
4 fact it was not conceived with this purpose in mind. I decided to test the possibility of
5 undertaking a secondary analysis of my narrative.
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8 9 **Methodology**

10 Before I deal with the mechanics of constructing the life story at the heart of this paper it is
11 important to clarify that life history is not a unified concept. Tierney (2000) contends that
12 those doing life history tend to talk past each other rather than argue (p. 539) and, in setting
13 out my understanding of what life history does and what it might do, I am merely elucidating
14 my position rather than staking a privileged claim in the space of life history.
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23 ***What do I mean by life history?***

24 In my view life history research attends not only to the life stories of the individuals
25 concerned, but also to the meaning of those stories in their wider historical, social, political,
26 cultural and geographical contexts. Bertaux (1981) contends therefore that life stories may
27 be contained in life histories but not vice versa. This creates a clear conceptual space
28 between life history research and life story research. Goodson & Sikes (2001) maintain that
29 'the life story individualizes and personalizes, the life history contextualizes and politicizes'
30 pp. 87–88). This is not to denigrate the personal story. Indeed Goodson argues that starting
31 with the personal story is absolutely crucial and cites the persistent failure of educational
32 reform as the result of 'ignorance or denial of personal missions and biographical mandates'.
33 He further states that these 'seem a good place to locate our studies (and indeed our
34 policies) not reluctantly at the end of a process, but enthusiastically at the beginning
35 (Goodson, 2014, p. 1)'.
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49 Nor am I suggesting that life *stories* are immaculate conceptions, divorced from the
50 contexts in which they are produced or that they are devoid of the influence of those
51 contexts. Recasting personal stories as something other than life histories serves instead to
52 re-configure the work that they each do and asks different questions of the role of structure
53 and agency in a person's life.
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3 Wright Mills (1959) provided the underpinning rationale for use of life history. He
4 maintains that the 'sociological imagination' 'enables its possessor to understand the larger
5 historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and external career of a variety of
6 individuals' (p.5). He also states that it 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the
7 relations between the two within society' (p.6). If we do this we will start to understand how
8 'personal troubles' become 'public issues' (p.226). The sociological imagination therefore not
9 only provides a way of researching inner life and external career. It evokes a biography-
10 history-society nexus that is concentrated on the dynamic and relational. It is for this reason
11 that life history can constitute the 'perfect type of sociological material' (Thomas and
12 Znaniecki 1918-20, p. 1832). It is significant here that one of the earliest sociological uses of
13 life histories was of Polish peasants migrating to the United States, suggesting that there life
14 history itself can be *used* to explore issues of migration. The question in the paper is a
15 different one, however, in that I was concerned to test whether a life history about could be
16 used in this way *if that had not been its original purpose*.

31 32 **Method**

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34 My aim in revisiting the original life history narrative was of a different order to that described
35 by Ellis (2009) who used a return to previous writings as an opportunity to question and
36 challenge earlier versions of events in her life from the perspective of the present' (p. 12). My
37 aim was to test how life history could be put to work. Once written must it be discarded? Is it
38 applicable only to the purpose for which it was conceived? Unlike Ellis therefore I have not
39 revised my original writing in the light of the passage of time and through the lens of the
40 present, although there is bound to be a temporal bearing on what I have written.

41
42 In order to construct a life history of my parent's story I first isolated all passages in
43 the original that related to my parents. I made few changes to the extracted passages,
44 sufficient only to retain the integrity of the whole after removing passages about myself that
45 did not contribute to my parents' story. I added more detail about the circumstances under
46 which my parents came to Huddersfield but this amounted to very little and is descriptive in
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3 nature. Despite my parents both being inveterate story-tellers, they invariably presented
4 themselves to their children as parents (Goffman, 1990). They did not consider it appropriate,
5 or necessary, to share other aspects of themselves with their offspring. My knowledge about
6 my parents' lives before they lived together is scant, cobbled together from bits of paper we
7 found after they died, from eavesdropped conversations and from secrets revealed by others
8 once they had died and it 'didn't matter'.
9

10
11 I then analysed the life history narrative in the light of some recent literature on the
12 distinction between different groups of migrants and assessed to what extent it might
13 contribute to this literature, even though it had not been conceived with this purpose in mind.
14 The success of the experiment might be evaluated in terms of the nature and extent of its
15 contribution to this literature
16

17 ***Ethical considerations***

18 The ethical ramifications of my methodology make themselves known to me through my
19 reluctance to characterise what I am doing as 'secondary analysis of data' which is too
20 detached a term for what I was undertaking. Sayer (2011) maintains that most people 'are
21 sentient, *evaluative beings*: we don't just think and interact but evaluate things including the
22 past and the future' (Sayer, 2011, p. 1, original emphasis). And yet social science has a habit
23 of disregarding this evaluative relationship, turning instead to 'concepts such as convention,
24 habit, discourses, socialization, reciprocity, exchange, discipline, power and a host of others'
25 that produce 'an anodyne account of living that renders our evident concern about what we
26 do and what happens to us incomprehensible' (Sayer 2011. p. 2).
27

28 In research terms there is no ethical reason I should not re-analyse this data. Both my
29 parents died years ago. Their informed consent is no longer necessary. My siblings are not
30 present in my narrative, except in a tangential way. This exclusion/omission may address
31 some critiques of personal life writing which rightly interrogate the ethics of implicating others
32 by association (Tolich, 2004; 2010), but it also leaves my version of my parents' story
33 untroubled by their (my siblings') interpretations. Regardless of how institutional ethics would
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3 view my methodology, I would say it raises trenchant moral issues. It is not simply as Kuhn
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5 (2002) summarises, that 'memory never provides access to or represents the past 'as it was'
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7 and that 'the activity of remembering is far from neutral' (p.157). Nor is it that remembering
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9 my parents is still both painful and comforting. Nor is it that I find it difficult to achieve critical
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11 distance from something to which I am so emotionally attached. The reason/emotion
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13 dichotomy makes little sense to me, and Sayer (2011) contends that it is only one of a
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15 number of conceits of eighteenth century thinking, despites its orthodox status, Conversely,
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17 Nussbaum's (2001) view of emotions as 'upheavals of thought' does resonate with my
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19 experiences.

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21 Remembering my parents *is*, an 'almost visceral engagement' (Kuhn 2002, p.155),
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23 but the reason it evokes concerns of a moral nature is due in no small part to my self-
24
25 identification as a 'feminist researcher'. I mean a number of things by this, but my guiding
26
27 principles are derived from Bhavnani's (1993) engagement with Haraway's (1988) discussion
28
29 of what 'feminist objectivity' might mean. Among these principles is a responsibility not to re-
30
31 inscribe people into prevailing representations. But at the same time it comprises a
32
33 commitment not to valorise or romanticise them (Bhavnani, 1993). It also involves
34
35 cognizance of the macro political settings in which research is conducted, which is in tune
36
37 with life history methodology in which both story and context share primacy. However, most
38
39 trenchant of all is Skeggs' (2002) criticism that the 'techniques of telling also rely on accruing
40
41 the stories of others in order to make them property for oneself' (p. 349). It sometimes seems
42
43 that academic labour entails a choice between being a good researcher, *or* a good daughter,
44
45 *or* a good feminist.

46 47 48 **Have you heard the one about the economic migrant and a displaced person?**

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50 My trust in stories to explain as well as describe (Goodson, 2013, 2014) is due in no small
51
52 part to my parents. Their lives could be storied in two halves – before and after the Second
53
54 World War, before and after they settled in Huddersfield. I saw them living their efforts to
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3 maintain a coherent sense of their own selves and their own identities in the context of that
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5 brutal rupture.

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7 I do not have the authority to tell my parents' stories and yet without theirs mine is
8
9 meaningless. So the appropriation of their stories speaks volumes about my own education
10
11 journey. I tell their stories to strangers when they insisted on keeping them private,
12
13 sometimes within their immediate family, but often just between themselves. With the
14
15 passage of time I don't keep these stories quiet because I think they contribute to a 'greater
16
17 good', but I would not deny the moral issues re-telling them raises.

18
19 My thoughts and feelings about and approach to research have their heart in the love
20
21 and respect I deeply feel for my parents as people (I judge them more harshly as parents).
22
23 They lived, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, as historical beings within the structures
24
25 and institutions in which they found themselves. I agree with Wright Mills that 'the larger
26
27 institutions within which life is enacted... on occasion bear upon it more grievously than do
28
29 the intimate environments of childhood' (1959, p.12) and being born to these people at this
30
31 time, in those circumstances conspired to make 'the family' both a refuge and a prison and
32
33 the site of most of the fundamental things I learned about the world. It is by far the most
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35 significant contribution to my educational story. So I have to tell this story, I have to own what
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37 Redwood (2008) calls the violence it does. And my parents would be both angry and proud
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39 that I relate what they would have suppressed. It is a privilege of the education they both
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41 highly prized and summarily dismissed. 'Letters after your name' elicited both reverence and
42
43 disdain – such a person, though obviously 'a highly intelligent fellow (sic)' had clearly 'never
44
45 done a day's work in their lives'.

46
47 The Second World War, with my parents acting as a conduit, is the historical event
48
49 within which I have to contextualise my life. This is not to imply determinism. Conversations
50
51 with my siblings highlight that we all focused on quite different things and processed and
52
53 interpreted our observations in different ways. But we were all 'the children of immigrants'
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55 regardless of how we then came to deal with that. And we all still occupy that postmodern
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3 phenomenon of the 'liminal space' and have trouble with monolithic and static identities
4 reflecting national and ethnic oscillations and mediations personified in my parents.
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7 Dad was an ethnic Serb from Croatia. He came to England as a 'displaced person' at
8 the end of the 1940s. He could speak English well enough to have been employed as a
9 teacher/interpreter when he first arrived, although where he learned the language is a
10 mystery because I know he received only a primary education, leaving school at eleven.
11 Likewise I am unaware of the circumstances that meant he, his father and two brothers were
12 able to come to England instead of being forcibly 'repatriated' (Tolstoy, 1986). I do know why
13 dad came to Huddersfield to work in the mills. His parents had been peasant farmers and he
14 had been charged with taking the goats up to the high mountain pastures in summer,
15 remaining there for days, sometimes weeks according to his own accounts. It produced in
16 him a lifetime loathing of the countryside. Dad was sociable and not made for the isolation of
17 village life in rural Croatia. He enjoyed the camaraderie of the mills and, perhaps inured by
18 his childhood experiences, could tolerate the heat, noise and dust, something I could not on
19 the rare occasions I went to see him at work. Dad became a 'naturalised' British citizen
20 before I was born. He went to church. Although it was a long haul he bought a house and he
21 sent money to family in Croatia and Serbia. His only regret about leaving his village and
22 coming to England was that he did not see his mother again, having left his village aged
23 sixteen.
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41 Mam was an economic migrant. She had two children aged seven and eight at the
42 time and 'no man to support' her. Food, let alone work or money, was scarce in post-war,
43 land-locked Austria and she arrived in Huddersfield in 1953, aged twenty-seven, to work as a
44 mender in the textile industry. England was an obvious destination for mam. She had
45 attended the equivalent of grammar school in Austria and spoke English to a good standard,
46 and there was a shortage of workers to fuel the post-war economic recovery. I still have a
47 group of friends I went to grammar school with. Of the seven of us, five had mothers who
48 were menders in the textile industry. So this was a major source of employment for working
49 class women at the time.
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3 Helping Britain out of a hole was not so much on mam's mind, however. She was
4 helping her own family out of its own hole. Her mender's wages supported herself, her
5 mother, her younger brother and her two children. I suspect the start of her problematic
6 relationship with food can be traced here and she mentioned often that sometimes she would
7 not eat from one day to the next. Mam enjoyed the work she did, she was proud that it was a
8 'skilled job' and that she could earn more than dad did as a warper. Mending was exclusively
9 'women's work', reflecting the gendered belief that women's 'natural' manual dexterity made
10 them suitable for the painstakingly fine work entailed in rectifying the often tiny imperfections
11 that occur in the production of 'pieces' of fine woollen worsted cloth.
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21 Mam registered as an 'alien' under the Aliens Order of 1920, which meant she had to
22 regularly report to the local police station. The last entry in her Certificate of Registration is
23 October 1959, after I was born. So I can legitimately claim that one of my parents at least
24 was an alien, something for which I am inordinately grateful (hooks, 2000). When her mother
25 died she brought her children and brother to England and they moved in with dad (would
26 they have stayed together otherwise?). I didn't know that my parents hadn't married until
27 1974, when I was fifteen, until I went through papers after they died and found a marriage
28 certificate. I also found a booking for the register office dated September 1959, just a couple
29 of months after I was born, but I will never know why they didn't keep the appointment, nor
30 why they finally decided to marry after all. Rubin's (1972/1992) research on working class
31 families in the US and Steedman's (2000) on the Poor Laws in England set out why it was in
32 some cases vital to stay quiet. Their relationship was by turns volatile and moribund and their
33 frequent arguments re-enacted, often explicitly, the Serbian struggles (dad) against Austro-
34 Hungarian imperialism (mam).
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49 My mother never became a British citizen and her children had 'dual nationality' but
50 she tried her very best to make sure we fitted in as English, even though she wanted us to be
51 Austrian. Dad took it for granted that we would be part of a Serbian cultural tradition even
52 though he was exceedingly proud of his British citizenship and relieved that he was working
53 in a textile mill instead of being a farmer, which would have been his lot had he not been
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3 displaced. He had not factored in mam's fierce opposition. He persisted for a while but by the
4
5 time I went to grammar school and could make my own choices the path of least resistance
6
7 was taken until our connection with our Serbian heritage was all but forgotten. However, for
8
9 reasons I little understand, when I had children it became a matter of some importance that
10
11 they were christened in a Serbian Orthodox church. All the 'third generation' cousins have
12
13 gone on to engage with their Serbian identity to a far greater degree than I or my siblings did,
14
15 a difficult undertaking for them in the light of the recent history of the former Yugoslavia.

16
17 This does not mean I felt 'English'. I did not identify with those boisterous, noisy
18
19 confident children at primary school. I knew nothing of their games and nursery rhymes –
20
21 and they knew nothing of mine. Our prayers were said in Serbo-Croat and German. I had
22
23 never sung a hymn. One year we learned Silent Night in German for a carol concert – I didn't
24
25 tell that I already knew it.

26
27 I was always aware that my parents were 'different' and their children were 'different'
28
29 by association. Dark-skinned ('dusky', as one, short-lived, boyfriend pointed out), dark-haired
30
31 apart from my youngest sister who took after mam, we were a larger than average family
32
33 who ate 'foreign' food in cramped conditions, a shifting population of never less than six
34
35 people in a house with two bedrooms, making sporadic and incoherent attempts to fit in. A
36
37 few years ago I read Alan Bennett's (2005) story of his parents and I was struck by the
38
39 similarities (Bennett calls his mother mam as well). I wondered then how significant their
40
41 'foreign-ness' was to their difference.

42
43 Despite her attempts at 'normalising' the family, mam was all too aware of the futility
44
45 of trying to fit in. The pendulum regularly swung back and we would be exhorted to 'keep
46
47 ourselves to ourselves'. For many years I felt frustrated by the energy it took to dissemble
48
49 and I often blamed mam for her controlling ways. Later, reading about how families would
50
51 come to be known as poor and would attract the attentions of the state once they could no
52
53 longer keep their stories to themselves (Vincent 1991) I better understood the double bind of
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55 being poor. Tell your story and risk losing control of your life, or succumb to secrecy. I feel
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57 extremely sorry now for blaming my mother and I am fully in agreement with Reay (2005)
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3 and Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) that class is felt in psychic as well as structural
4 ways and with Andrew Sayer (2005) that it also has moral significance. More recently still, I
5 wonder if mam's anxiety was also to do with her status as an Austrian national.
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8 9 **Discusson: My parents' story and the academic literature on migration**

10 The experiment began proper when I set out to ascertain whether, and if so how, the
11 excavated life history account about my parents articulated with the academic literature on
12 migration. This would then inform my evaluation of, and provide a measure for, the success
13 of the experiment. Initially I planned to identify themes in the literature and then return to the
14 life history to evaluate the extent and nature of its contribution to this literature. However, the
15 size and range of the extant literature was not conducive to this process and I reversed the
16 direction of my analysis, starting with motifs, that I identified in the life history and looking for
17 their articulation in the migration literature. I also limited myself to writings on conceptual
18 distinction because, firstly, the debate was topical (Papadopoulos, 2015; Rovisco, 2015;
19 Taylor, 2015), but secondly because the issue of conceptual distinction between groups of
20 migrating peoples is an overarching one, embedded in the problem of how to theorise
21 migration itself (Castles, 2010; Feller, 2005; Koser and Martin 2011).
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36 It was not the case therefore that I approached the literature in innocence. On my
37 own analysis my parents' story indicated the futility of making distinctions and highlighted the
38 complexity of meaning contained within particular terminologies. But it is worth noting that the
39 issues I identified are located across a range of fields such as migration studies, citizenship
40 studies and refugee studies and within particular disciplines, primarily sociology (Castles,
41 2003, 2010), history (Long, 2013), law (Karatani, 2005) and philosophy (Shacknove, 1985),
42 where they tend to be treated in different ways (Brettel and Hollifield, 2009). Therefore I was
43 not aiming for meta-analysis, but to determine whether the motifs in my parents' story had
44 been taken up anywhere in the literature and whether they added to or refined any of the
45 analyses across this range of writings.
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3 The first motif I sought in the literature was whether there was a prevalent view on the
4 possibility (and wisdom) of distinguishing between economic migrants and displaced persons
5 or refugees. In general most arguments supported Long (2013) who states that the weight of
6 empirical and historical evidence, among which I also include my parents' story, falls in
7 favour of the erasure of distinctions between different types of migration. The second motif I
8 looked for were reasons why it might be necessary to make distinctions. Hathaway (2007) for
9 example argues in respect of the distinction between refugees and internally displaced
10 peoples (IDPs), but the argument is generally applicable, that distinctions are necessary in
11 order to protect the status of refugees in law. Hathaway's arguments have, however, been
12 robustly countered (Cohen, 2007; DeWind, 2007; Bakewell, 2011). In terms of my parents'
13 story it is difficult to comprehend how the law protected or exposed my father to a greater
14 degree than it did my mother. They each in their own way used the law as a shelter and saw
15 it as a threat. Because dad was naturalised he was probably afforded greater protection than
16 mam. But he rarely left Huddersfield, let alone the UK, and he never returned to what was
17 then Yugoslavia. His efforts to maintain his Serbian-ness were realised instead in his
18 commitment to his church, his weekly meetings with his brothers and his friends, and in a
19 myriad other cultural and social activities in which he tried, ultimately in vain, to involve us.
20 His efforts set him on a collision course with mam, whose protection in the face of the law
21 she vested in her children. But again this played out in nuanced ways. We had Austrian
22 nationality as well as British, but she was genuinely anxious that nothing we said or did
23 outside the domain of the family home should mark us out as 'different'.
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45 The third motif I looked for was the notion of deservedness. The question I was
46 asking of the story was whether mam, as an economic migrant, was less deserving of being
47 in England than dad as a displaced person. On my reading, my parents' life history reflected
48 not only the challenge of answering this question but also the difficulty of defining the criteria
49 for evaluating deservedness. Although mam was an economic migrant, a category currently
50 at the 'undeserving' end of the spectrum, Austrians were starving after the war and she had
51 four people to support financially. The issue of repatriation renders the issue more
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3 straightforward for dad because a return 'home' would almost certainly have meant death,
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5 but it is important to understand that my father did not articulate his coming to England in
6
7 these terms. For example, he told me once that the reason he did not go to the USA was
8
9 simply that applications to the UK were being processed more quickly. Moreover, dad, even
10
11 as a displaced person had a degree of choice and freedom from responsibility that was not
12
13 salient in mam's case. As both my parents also worked equally as long and conscientiously
14
15 in an industry that was short of labour it might be said that my parents' story, rather than
16
17 providing a definitive answer to the question of deservedness, serves to highlight the fact
18
19 that, at the very least, it is not a monolithic construction.

20
21 Defining deservedness is also a theme in the migration literature. Long (2013), for
22
23 example, highlights its historical contingency, foregrounding the way in which its meaning is
24
25 liable to shifts over time. However, she also maintains that the 'tangled history of refugee and
26
27 migrant identities' has been neglected (2013, p. 4), and she alludes to the 'ahistoricism' of
28
29 migration studies. By attending to how and why refugee as a distinct category was
30
31 *constructed* (p.6, emphasis added), 'not least to avoid any assumption that it represents the
32
33 "natural" or "obvious" conclusion of earlier debates' (p.6), she foregrounds 'the fluid and
34
35 changing understandings of poverty, persecution and protection that international policy-
36
37 makers employed in developing regimes to govern both refugees and migrants during the
38
39 inter-war period' (p.6). She contends that this led to the separation of refugee and migrant
40
41 identities, despite the fact that research 'findings have shown persuasively that "refugee" and
42
43 "migrant" flows are often interconnected with communities, families and even individuals
44
45 shifting between these different policy categories'.

46
47 The notion of deservedness is to my mind entangled in ideas about agency, which
48
49 was the fourth motif I looked for in the literature. In practice, the interplay of agency with
50
51 structural factors often creates a theoretical 'impasse' in migration theory (Bakewell, 2010).
52
53 My parents' stories, conversely, serve to *animate* theory based on the dynamics of structure
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55 and agency. For example, the nature of mam's migration was further complicated by the fact
56
57 she was from Austria, an 'enemy' of the UK. This may have accounted to some extent for her
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3 reluctance to become involved in any activities outside the home that might draw attention to
4 our connection to this fact, and why I did not reveal that I could sing Silent Night in German.
5
6 Nevertheless it was the early 1970s before she could stop painting over the swastikas that
7
8 would appear on our gate posts. However, she spoke good English and the UK was short of
9
10 workers; workers, moreover, who could do 'women's work'. England was therefore an
11
12 obvious choice for her. Her decision was also mediated through her embodied-ness, as the
13
14 most able of the four other members of her Austrian family.
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17 I found that this life history resonated particularly with Bakewell's (2011) analysis that
18
19 a failure to conceptually unpack the terms refugee, migrant and IDP has led to confusion and
20
21 a failure to get to grips with what these terms actually mean. Hence any attempt to
22
23 distinguish between different groups is unproductive (p. 14). He argues that these terms can
24
25 be 'used in at least three different senses - as a process, condition or category' (p. 19). He
26
27 goes on to state that 'While it may be correct to say that refugees are not migrants (seen as
28
29 categories), this does not mean refugees cannot become migrants (as a condition) or that
30
31 displacement cannot be usefully analysed as a form of migration (as a process)' (p.25). In
32
33 short the distinctions to be made are not among categories but in the mechanisms of
34
35 categorisation itself. Moreover, the relationships between each of these senses of the word
36
37 are not static and indicate the historical dynamic between the changing meaning of the
38
39 category 'refugee' and processes of migration for example (Elie, 2010).
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43 **Conclusion**

44
45 The account presented here can give only a flavour of the lengthy process I undertook in
46
47 testing my/parents' life history. Nevertheless it does support my conclusion that my/parents'
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49 story does more than articulate with the migration literature on conceptual distinction. It also
50
51 animates, supplements and interrogates theories therein about the utility and futility of
52
53 distinguishing between migrants and refugees. In this respect the experiment has been a
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55 success.
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3 However, this paper has not explicitly engaged with the ethics and politics of
4 employing life history in ways for which it was not intended. What might this mean for life
5 history research? How does the potential for secondary analysis of a life history written for
6 another purpose change perceptions of its 'relevance' in a climate where the promotion of
7 'big data', 'value for money', quantifiable 'impact' and 'public engagement' rather than public
8 service are to the fore? On the one hand life history research is time consuming and does
9 not purport to generalisability. The possibility of multiple analyses might, perhaps make it
10 more attractive to funders. But what is at stake for life history if it becomes entangled in the
11 politics of research in this way? What, moreover, are the ethical ramifications? What are
12 participants agreeing to? How far are others who are implicated in life histories, such as my
13 siblings, to be considered if life histories are to be scrutinised in different arenas, each with
14 their own values, philosophies, even paradigms? Although they have always been at the
15 back of my mind, these are trenchant questions that I have not been able to engage with
16 here. Therefore I end on a cautious note, with the recommendation to focus on these
17 questions in the next stage of the experiment.
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