Students transform the socio-economic structures they came from: learning from life-story interviews.

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Introduction

- Miratho project (2016-2020) inclusive higher education learning outcomes (www.miratho.com)

- How do low- young people from low-income households educated in rural and township schools access, participate in, and succeed in higher education, and then move into work?

- Multi-method, including a statistical analysis, a survey, a photovoice project and longitudinal life-story interviews with students (64 and 61).

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Overview

Lens: Bertaux and Thompson (2009) ideas about exploring social mobility qualitatively through life histories.

The life-stories a group of historically excluded young people: are driven by the prospect of securing better lives; take up opportunities; tackle socio-economic constraints; thereby contributing to change for themselves, their families and their communities.

Data from two life-story interviews with four students illustrate what can be revealed abut the complex processes of personal transformation and social mobility through higher education.

Definitions

- Combine two traditions: subjective meaning v. informants about contexts.

- *'It is the political task of the social scientist…to translate personal troubles into public issues*.' (C.W. Mills, 1959)

- '**Life stories**' : students' narrations about past.

- '**Life histories**': contextualised stories illuminating how individual agency and social structure interact to produces changes in lives and in society.

- 'Social mobility':

Justification for methodology

Reveals:

- complexities of time and culture bound social processes

- centrality of subjective experience in how constraints and enablements play out in lives, maintaining the status quo or producing change.

Illustrating the methodology: context and agency

- Context: Families with almost no formal education; communities in which no-one has been to university, many or most are unemployed and there is little chance of escaping poverty; and, poor quality, severely under-resourced school education.

- Students positioned as agents in their own and their families, and communities'' social mobility.

Illustrating the Methodology: The students

Student	University/Degree	Parents and family	Mentor/partner
Maduvha (24)	Country, BEd Foundation	Pensioner/sweet seller, 1st at university- 4 siblings	
Vutomi (21)	Country, BSc in Soil Science	Pensioner/ and unemployed youngest of 4	'Brother of another mother' and niece
Nelwisa (25)	Rural, Diploma in Marketting, changes to Public Relations	Driver/unemployed-oldest of 3. Has a child at home with her mother	Aunt
Olwethu (21)	Rural, BSc in Biological Sciences	Unemployed/deceased. Lives with grandparents	Pastor uncle

Illustrating the methodology: Material and Social Conditions

- Before university: parents, schooling, community (conversion trilogy)

- At University: 'Intermediate poverty group', e.g. sometimes unable: to have a bed to themselves; to have enough to eat every-day; to buy adequate toiletries or clothing; to buy a laptop or books; or, pay their accommodation, travel, registration or fees.

- Precarity: no peace of mind.

Illustrating the Methodology: Navigational reasoning

- Unrecognised capability for thinking about what constitutes a better life for oneself and one's family and how to bring it about

- 'Narrative of self': endurance and passionate desire

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Ethical considerations

- Interviewing; between interviews, and analysing; interpreting and representing

- Respect

- Narrative imagination: *We open up to the other, imagining the world through the other's being, [trying to] feel close to what this person feels, knowing we can never fully imagine their experience, but trying anyway.*' (Ellis, p. 439)

- Interest and concern.

Conclusion: Life histories and social change

- University as a means of escaping poverty -their own, their families and communities and more broadly all people living in unacceptable poverty.

- Ambition being curbed to look after families in the more immediate future.

- Commitment to the intergenerational family network.

- Outcomes uncertain, but poised for change.