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THE METHODS OF DATA
COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
METODY ZBIERANIA I ANALIZY
DANYCH W BADANIACH
EDUKACYJNYCH



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The Individual Subject vs. Collective Subject in Biographical Research – Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological Aspects. In Search of Similarities and Differences*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to presents key similarities and differences related to two dimensions of the biographical method: the individual (where analysis is conducted by an individual researcher) and the collective (where the deconstruction and reconstruction of

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the text are carried out by a collective entity – a group, a team, or co-researchers). Greater attention is paid to the strand of research on collective memory work, as this approach remains largely unknown in pedagogy. The conclusions emphasize the promotion of the collective approach within the biographical method due to its distinct research possibilities. The resulting social knowledge, which uncovers new meanings of experiences, carries emancipatory potential, significant for both individuals and groups participating in the collective process.

Keywords: collective memory work, collective biography writing, collaborative research, collaborative writing, biographical method.

Introduction

The assumptions that define how we understand social reality (ontological assumptions) and how we can study it (epistemological assumptions) shape the researcher's thinking regarding methods of data analysis and interpretation, thereby influencing the choice of research design or research procedure/method. Biographical research – interpreted as a social phenomenon – implies a “multiplicity of (con)texts, interpretations, thematic and methodological diversity” (Każmierska, 2012, p. 10). The methodological diversity mentioned here, within the scope of the present study, concerns a comparative analysis of the classical approach to biographical research and a less familiar approach related to collective research based on collaborative writing and joint examination of both what has been written and what has been left unsaid. The review of key similarities and differences encompasses two dimensions related to the individual and collective biographical approach – those in which analysis is conducted by an individual entity (the researcher) and a collective entity (a team, co-researchers). Contrasting the characteristics of both approaches aims to highlight the specific features of the strands focused on **Collective Memory Work** (hereafter: CMW), which are heterogeneous and characterized by a variety of detailed solutions.

In the CMW approach, **collective memory** is understood differently than in historical or cultural studies. It does not refer to a type of historical awareness or collective memory of the past, as seen, for example, in Pierre Nora's work. Scholars in this tradition primarily focused on “sites of memo-

ry”, “places of remembrance”, symbolic commemoration of historical events, and the institutional dimension of memory. This understanding is rather distant from **biographical memory**, which relates to lived experiences, such as learning.

We emphasize that the aim of this article is not to demonstrate the cognitive value of the CMW approach, critically analyze its fundamental assumptions, present the research procedure (one can familiarize oneself with the subsequent steps of the research procedure and the course of the discussion in the publications of Robert Hamm, 2021b), or identify potential research and application fields, as these aspects have already been described in the sources listed in the bibliography (Zbróg, 2020; Szplit & Zbróg, 2023). Nor is the article intended to provide an in-depth reflection on the theory and methodology of biographical research by referring to canonical texts, since the classical version of the biographical approach is already well known. Instead, the authors prioritize highlighting the key similarities and differences between the two approaches, contributing new elements to the academic discussion and bringing fresh perspectives to the biographical approach. This strategy may seem to contrast the discussed methods starkly, yet it also reveals their distinct characteristics and research potential. Comparing one new approach with a well-established one serves to organize methodological issues systematically.

Research background

The CMW approach is interpreted in the literature as a bundle of concepts or a school of thought based on constructivist assumptions, which, however, do not possess complete clarity and coherence although the need to “understand and analyse social relations and knowledge production” (Antonićević, 2024, p. 2) can be considered a common element. Within this perspective, we have several ways of collecting, analysing and interpreting data, which differ in terms of the research procedure, but are still attributed to CMW (Hamm, 2021a; 2021b), e.g., Collective Biography Writing (Davies & Gannon, 2006), Collaborative Research (Wyatt et al., 2017; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2023).

Nevertheless, all of these perspectives share certain common assumptions, which can be summed up as a radical, political, disruptive, and creative approach to research conducted within a collaborative group that engages in discussions on theoretical, practical, and ethical issues.

From the very beginning, CMW was open to adaptations. Its author, who is Frigga Haug, emphasised that the method gives: “freedom for individuals attempting to do memory work to change the method for themselves, remaining within – or critically expanding – the theoretical framework of the process” (Haug, 1999, p. 2). Describing CMW as a useful method in social research, Haug emphasised the importance of two dimensions of working with memory: group cooperation within the process and theoretical foundations, referring her research primarily to a certain form of critical discourse analysis. “Memory-work is a kind of text work beyond conventional narrative analysis [...]. It is not only experience, but work with the experience, which is useful as a research method” (Haug, 1999, p. 2). Over time, various templates have been made available that can be used as a platform for developing a CMW project. As part of a critical analysis of research procedures characteristic of CMW, Robert Hamm (2021a, pp. 167–182) identified five models that can be used in CMW research. Anyone considering using CMW today can take advantage of the growing number of these adaptations, but will still always have to make choices about their own interpretation of the method.

The understanding of the essence of CMW is significantly influenced by Thomas Metzinger’s (2004) concept of self-awareness, in which he argues against the existence of objective self-awareness as presented in the theory of Shelley Duval and Robert Wicklund (1972). Cultural obviousness imposes the belief that our self-knowledge is objective and real – that it is “true”, just like what we know about others, the world, and reality. Thomas Metzinger (2004) asserts that we cannot be the cause of our actions and decisions because, in reality, only a model of ourselves exists, providing us with the illusion of experiencing the self. We perceive the world through this model and by means of it. However, we do not see it, nor are we aware of it, because we cannot recognize something that remains transparent to our cognition.

The subject of research in CMW is, importantly, opaque – not transparent even for the subjects/collaborative researchers themselves. Only a group of other people can liberate us from “opacity” because they help us see the illusions relating to ourselves and our perspective on ourselves and the world (Metzinger, 2004). Adopting a viewpoint related to our position within the community obviously directs the narrative. The experience brought into the group by the co-researchers serves to question or problematize various aspects of subjectivity and individual autonomy. A collective encounter with the text leads to the creation of a kind of group representation of the studied phenomenon (the concept representation is used in the sense of Moscovici) (Zbróg, 2017). This way of conducting research allows us to better understand the originality of CMW, expressed through the participatory model of research, making the research situation not only a quest for answers to questions but also a process of building a shared understanding and the crossing of perspectives between the researcher and the participants. This understanding of the research situation also provides an opportunity for biographical learning and the development of participants’ self-awareness. In such a model, the research situation also becomes a situation of social support. CMW is a process of systematic inquiry: starting with data collection and documentation of important information, through to analysis and interpretation of this data, it is carried out in accordance with an established methodology (Schratz et al., 1995; Haug, 1999; Onyx & Small, 2001; Schratz & Walker 2005; Stephenson & Kippax, 2011; Wihlborg, 2017; Wyatt et al., 2017; Hamm, 2021 a, 2021b; Hipfl, 2023; Nyhagen & Goode, 2024).

The data collected includes: memos, notes, transcripts of discussions; written memory-scenes; memos, records or transcripts of discussions of empathic reading, and of distanced analysis of memory-scenes (in succession); notes/drafts on topical transfers as derived from the group’s text-analyses; internal communication and feedback between group members between CMW-meetings and after concluding the text-analyses; potentially further material collected beyond the realms of the text-analyses. CMW leads to the construction of new, transferable kind of knowledge.

Martyn Denscombe describes this phenomenon as “an imaginative process in which the reader of the research uses information about the particular instance that has been studied to arrive at a judgement about how far it would apply to other comparable instances. The question becomes ‘to what extent could the findings be transferred to other instances?’ rather than ‘to what extent are the findings likely to exist in other instances?’” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 299).

The researcher, together with co-researchers, interprets the data and makes final conclusions: “but the readers of the research are not passive recipients who merely soak up the analysis presented by the researcher. To a greater or lesser extent [...] the readers themselves engage in interpreting and evaluating the findings. They [...] imaginatively transfer the findings to other situations, relying on their own knowledge and values in doing so” (Denscombe, 2009, p. 189). They encourage fellow researchers and potential readers to take action, which is referred to in the critical approach as generalised power to act. It is understood as an ability encompassing subjective foundations and possibilities for action, and also means the possibility for an individual to engage in existing social relations towards emancipatory change, rather than blindly submitting to its appropriation by socio-political structures (Haug, 1999).

The areas of similarities and differences in the individual and collective biographical approaches

Both the individual and collective biographical approaches are characterized by variations within theoretical assumptions as well as the theoretical categories (concepts) that serve as a point of reference. However, we must keep in mind that these variations are assumed and there are no absolute limitations in this regard.

Theoretical assumptions

- A. The individual biography analyzed by the researcher is based on/draws on:
theory of critical moments (Gardner, 1993; Gibbs, 2011), **biographical**

learning (Mezirow, 1991; Alheit, 2011), **theories of individual identity** (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 2001; Erikson 2004), **phenomenology** (Moustakas, 2001), **theory of social action** (Znaniecki, 1988), **life course theory** (Bühler, 1999), **ethnomethodology** (Garfinkel, 1984).

- B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers) draws on: post-structuralism, social constructivism (symbolic interactionism, interpretivism), critical theory (Charmaz, 2006), grounded theory, theory of self-awareness (Metzinger, 2004)

Basic theoretical categories

The study includes selected categories that provide a kind of context within which the analysis is conducted.

- A. The individual biography analysed by the researcher refers to the following conceptual categories: self-narrative, epiphany, lifeline, critical events, metaphor, encounter, self-concept, Subjectivity reflexivity, turning point, narrativity, ambiguity, transgression, script analysis (Karkowska, 2020a; 2020b; 2025).
- B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers) refers to different categories, some of which have a rather universal character: intra-actions, diffraction, illusion emancipation, autonomy, embodiment, *personal science*, agency subject in the process of learning), difference.

Ontological assumptions (referring to the studied segment of the social world, rather than the method itself or a single phenomenon)

- A. The individual biography analysed by the researcher

The representation constitutes an image of the social world, the only one that the individual possesses. It is difficult to separate the individual from their world in the research process. The most significant part of the reality being studied is human experiences and emotions, including those within shared relationships and collective actions (individual biography, collective

biography). Reality is interpreted from one's own perspective. The individual attaches specific, subjective meanings to their experiences. According to the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, facts have meaning in a certain context, both individual and socio-cultural, from the current perspective, as well as in relation to the past. The researcher-participant relationship assumes the separation of roles of the narrator and the researcher.

B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers)

The co-founder of the CMW approach, Frida Haug (1987, p. 58), argues that socio-political changes depend on the "collective subject", on "we", on collective memory work, because individual experiences, the details of memories, are potentially generalizable. The product of research conducted within the CMW approach is the conclusions constructed within the group, relating to the power of the socio-cultural and political discourse over us/our knowledge of ourselves (Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2021). Theorizing experience, its deconstruction, and reconstruction lead to new meanings and highlight the agency of the subjects. As Metzinger (2004) argues, through group analyses, by stepping outside the space of research, beyond oneself – to other people, to the group – we can become aware of the "illusion" of self-reflection. Only by reflecting in the eyes of others can we know ourselves, our beliefs, and become aware of our entanglement in cultural obviousness, in practices imposed by the community, and in submitting to the prevailing discourse of a given group.

The researcher-participant relationship assumes role interchangeability between researcher and participants (co-researchers).

Epistemological assumptions

A. The individual biography analysed by the researcher

The social world is the world of human experiences, daily actions, and interactions, whose symbolic meanings and significance are revealed in cultural texts through the signs contained within them, which both the researcher and

participants interpret during the research process. This interpretation and deconstruction performed by the participant and the researcher constitute the goal of biographical research. Memory as a phenomenon of persistence, recollection, and preservation of what has passed becomes an element of biographical narrative in the subject's everyday experience. It allows the events that shape the subject's identity to be accessible not only in the current perspective, here and now, but also to appear as an element of intergenerational transmission.

B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers)

CMW, thanks to its specific research procedure, allows for the discovery of our entanglement in relationships, discourses, events, and the socio-cultural, communal context of knowledge construction. This method differs from traditionally used discourse analysis methods (e.g., CDA), particularly with its specific methodology based on group discussions, the collective gathering of data (during CBW), and the collective work on the memories written and (re)edited by the co-researchers (Hamm, 2021b). The practice of writing autobiographical memories in the third person, treating gaps and silences in memories as objects for analysis, as well as the post-structuralist adherence to the idea that authors should not analyse their own texts, are ways of questioning the notion of self-knowledge and the concept of understanding oneself. These methods allow the author of a biographical episode to change their perspective on their own “interiority” and beliefs.

During CMW research, the group co-creates knowledge that, after the reconstruction of the discussion, first takes the form of written history (analysis of the subtext of the episode). The outcome of the research is knowledge constructed during the entire analysis, resulting from the collective deconstruction and reconstruction of the biographical episode, through which the story gains new meanings. These meanings are presented in the form of theses within the so-called thematic transfer (Hamm, 2021b). The newly constructed knowledge describes a “shift of the problem”—a change of meanings, a “change of the frame” that was initially imposed by the prevailing discourse

and which decided how we framed ourselves in the described episode. Haug (1987) elaborates on this topic in greater detail.

The collective discussion allows for stepping beyond the frame. Here, we again refer to Metzinger's theory of self-awareness, which emphasizes that other people are necessary for us to see other perspectives, to see things differently. Without collaboration with others, understanding ourselves, as well as understanding what is happening in the world (including the ideas of justice, equality, diversity, etc., that define it), becomes difficult, if not impossible (Wihlborg, 2015).

The epistemological position of CMW refers to:

(1) The dissolution of the categories of researcher and researched, which automatically transforms the research into an emancipatory learning project, and the learning itself into research. The study is a collective/group process (collective work with memories; in CBW, memories are also edited collectively).

(2) CMW is a group process, the essence of which is expanding knowledge about the power-knowledge relationship with the intention of increasing the participants' ability to act. The ability to act refers to the individual engaging in existing social relations towards an increasing and collective appropriation of the structures that determine life, rather than blindly submitting to them. It is assumed that it is possible to become aware of the trajectory of the construction of meanings that determine our own life practice.

(3) The generalized force of action – it is collective; it exists for all, contained in a network that encompasses the subjective foundations and possibilities of action. Without a group perspective, it is not possible to become aware of our entanglements in cultural obviousness/in the power of discourses (Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2021).

Methodological assumptions

A. The individual biography analysed by the researcher

The method of investigation should take into account the intersubjectivity of social reality, considering the perspective of the participants as expressed in their statements. The study provides an opportunity to reveal human per-

spectives and describe identities, relationships that make up the world(s) of life only when subjective reflexivity and a perspective of viewing the surrounding reality are considered.

The most commonly used research methods/techniques: interaction study, diagnostic survey with questionnaire technique, visual ethnography, auto-ethnography, ethnographic walk, daily participant observation, observation diary, thick description (Geertz, 2005) work with metaphor and parable, analysis of personal documents (letters, diaries), techniques generating narrative (Mc Addams, 2001), qualitative interview (Kvale, 2021), narrative interview, episodic interview (Flick, 2010).

B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers)

Group analysis of memories is activated as a result of the ambiguity of positioning and understanding oneself in the context of the analysed biographical episodes (“opacity”). Knowledge about oneself and the world, but also – more accurately – ignorance of oneself, requires undertaking group work. The research procedure, tailored to group analysis, facilitates critical control over the meanings assigned to narratives and the understanding of how discourses operate. The meanings collectively interpreted during the reconstructive work are clearly intersubjective, even though the biographical episode is the result of a subjective perception of the world/subjective perspective.

Most commonly used research methods/techniques: collective/group/shared memory work (CMW), collective biography writing (CBW), focused interviews (focus groups), case study, group text analysis (collaborative work of the group on a topic of mutual interest, on individual memories) – layers of textual meaning, very detailed critical discourse analysis: language used in the context of power-knowledge (Haug, 1999).

Sampling selection

A. The individual biography analysed by the researcher

The individuals or small groups are studied, purposive sampling, snowball method, recruitment through announcements on social media.

B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers)

A group of individuals willing and interested in participating in in-depth analyses (most often students, lecturers).

The method of data analysis

A. The individual biography analysed by the researcher

One can adopt a bottom-up perspective, as in grounded theory, which involves analysing phenomena and practices to construct an explanatory theory. One can also take an intermediate point of view, characteristic of biographical research (analysis of events and strategies for coping with them). Alternatively, one can adopt a top-down perspective, exemplified by social representation theory, where the starting point is theoretical concepts and models, and the result of the research is episodic and semantic-conceptual knowledge about everyday practices (Flick, 2010). During biographical research, various forms of analysis may occur.

B. The biography (biographical episode) analysed collectively (by a group of co-researchers)

The written fragment of the biography (one episode) is analysed collectively, described in great detail, with the exposure of remembered experiences. The analytical approach is based on four main assumptions: (1) the construction of one's own personality; (2) the tendency to eliminate contradictions; (3) the construction of meaning; and (4) the language used (construction of sentences, metaphors, clichés, silences). CMW resembles participatory and feminist research methods, CDA, collaborative auto-ethnography (collective auto-ethnography), experimental ethnographic methods, and grounded theory according to Kathy Charmaz – parallel processes of data analysis and generation (analytical loop).

Over time, various templates have been made available that can be used as a platform for developing a CMW project. As part of a critical analysis of research procedures characteristic of CMW, Robert Hamm (2021a, pp.

167–182) identified five models that can be used in CMW research. Anyone considering using CMW today can take advantage of the growing number of these adaptations, but will still always have to make choices about their own interpretation of the method.

Summary

The aim of the article was to highlight the basic similarities and differences in biographical research conducted by an individual (researcher) and a collective entity (group, team, co-researchers). Both approaches have a lot in common: they are based on social constructivism and interpretivism, they emphasise the importance of intersubjectivity, they focus on tensions and differences, they are a form of discourse analysis. In individual biography research, as well as in collective biography analysis, the starting point is a certain experience/event of the subject(s), while the filter through which the research material is interpreted is cultural and socialisation experiences, as well as the scripts of the researcher (individual approach) and the subjects performing the interpretation (CMW). In both types of biographical research, the analysis leads towards intersubjectivity, and its aim is to understand how our individual world is constructed through the prism of the cultural and social.

However, in individual biography research, the analysis concerns personal knowledge of a subjective nature, and we consider what kind of meaning is contained in the story (narrative) told by the subject. In the collective approach, on the other hand, the starting point for deconstruction is social practices and the prevailing discourse. From the outset, deconstruction is based on social knowledge, produced collectively – according to the assumptions of CMW research, only the collective context of deconstruction and reconstruction allows us to see the hidden/opaque causes of our actions.

It is assumed that collective analytical processes allow us to discover where in our history and experience there are tensions, flexible moments characterised by time and place, certain circumstances, in relation to which we can consider ways of using this flexibility for a common understanding of what

culture and discourse compel us to do. Knowledge constructed in this way may result in a generalised force of action in the future.

Both approaches are participatory in nature, understood as the active participation of the researcher and the subjects in the study. However, it takes different forms: in the data collection phase, it consists of a kind of role reversal (the respondents can also formulate questions, bringing the interview closer to a discussion), and in the interpretation phase, it is based on the attribution of meanings by a group of researchers. Both CMW and individual biography research pursue a similar practical goal of raising the level of self-awareness of the subjects participating in the research (emancipatory action).

In individual biography research, the use of communication and observation-based techniques (interviews, guided conversations, observation, diaries) predominates, and the data is supplemented by material produced by the subjects. In CMW, the proportions are reversed – materials with the status of products (documents) written individually (CMW) or collectively (CBW) are analysed first.

Conclusions

There is enough room for both individual and group perspectives in social science. CMW is an original example of a collective/collaborative approach. We believe that promoting the collective approach within the biographical method creates new research possibilities, the result of which, in the form of the social knowledge produced, with newly discovered meanings of the social and cultural experiences of the participants, carries emancipatory potential. This is important not only for individuals but also for groups participating in the collective process.

A collective approach to data collection and analysis is particularly effective in studying difficult, traumatic situations, helping to reconstruct and describe what people do not want to remember, e.g., CMW was used in post-war studies of women in Serbia (Antonijevic, 2024). This method is important for finding solutions, understanding extraordinary events, expressing or communicating one's problems, illnesses or difficult experiences. It allows

one to reconstruct the path and context of the emergence of specific feelings, to reflect on what one wants or can change in one's life, and to plan one's future path in a thoughtful manner (Pizzolati, 2025). The way data is analysed and interpreted within the CMW approach expands the personal and collective space for learning about oneself and discovering the limitations that result from stereotypes and socio-cultural patterns.

The main goal of the collective approach is to highlight individuals' experiences in a collective/social context and to give meaning to these memories in order to better understand social and cultural changes. Tracking personal trajectories towards individual emancipation and its impact on the position of individuals in communities allows for a deeper understanding of personal and social change. The transformative goal of CMW is to strengthen the capacity for collective action through critical individual and collective reflection, which can lead to personal change and its continuation towards the transformation of societies. CMW has the potential to change individuals and societies and lead to a better understanding of current positions by looking at the past (Antonijevic, 2024).

Working with memory clearly shows research participants that personal memories are socially constructed and culturally conditioned. In this sense, CMW counterbalances research methods that privilege individual experience detached from social context. The collective approach also provides a critical perspective on conventional autobiographical narratives, as these are based on individuals' personal experiences and have no reference to a shared socio-cultural context. In CMW, memories are seen as raw data through which the self and society are constructed. The interpretation of memories is not about how 'true' they are and how accurately they represent past events. Rather, it is about how the telling of these memories can (re)construct these events (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 51). The collective approach to data collection and analysis works particularly well in studying difficult, traumatic situations, helping to reconstruct and describe what people do not want to remember, e.g., CMW was [...] "memory-work is a process, which is itself a way and a goal. At the same time, it is a departure and impulse for change, which has to include the condition of our actions and beings" (Haug, 1999, p. 29).

Thanks to critical reflection on the collective approach, we can argue that CMW should be considered both a research method and a learning method. It is a research method because it generates material that can be systematically analysed and embedded in broader academic discourses. It is also a learning method because it creates space for reflective engagement, collective dialogue and reinterpretation of experiences. The creator of the method believed that the strength of CMW lies precisely in this duality, thanks to which it transcends the dichotomy between education and scientific research.

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