

Centring Reflexivity through the Polyphonic Life Histories of Autistic University Graduates

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Abstract

Polyphonic life histories provide a holistic view of individual trajectories without muting the subjectivity intrinsic to the narrative. Operating within the biographical narrative approach, it has traditionally focused on disadvantaged groups to promote their empowerment. The co-construction of life polyphonic histories involves a dialogical and reflexive process between the participants, those in their support networks, and researchers through which all parties are transformed. This paper focuses on 3 university histories of autistic graduates and includes the graduates themselves as well as their key supporters across their university journey (2 staff of the disability service, 3 therapists, 1 classmate, 1 friend, 2 family members and 2 teachers). We draw on Archer's model of reflexivity to examine the various ways that graduates navigate their world towards their "life projects" in dialogue with others. At the same time, we make explicit our own influences which inform the co-construction of the life histories. Data included semi-structured interviews with graduates and their written self-reports, alongside dyadic interviews with supporters, and a researcher's diary. These were constructed into a polyphonic life history narrative to reflect the uniqueness and analysed with Archer's theories in mind. Our paper deconstructs the hierarchies implicit in the research process by centring autistic graduates as agents of their own narratives and provides novel interpretation of how they reflexively mediate structural constraints and enablements across their university journeys.

Keywords: Archer, autism, higher education, biographical-narrative research, reflexivity