RESEARCH PAPER

Evaluating the long-term impact of widening participation interventions: the potential of the life story interview

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One of the key challenges facing those working in the field of widening participation is in determining the long-term impact of outreach interventions. Whilst there is value in considering the more immediate effect of such activity on participants' experiences, it is long-term evaluation that can reveal the consequences of involvement on such schemes. However, in seeking to evaluate in this way practitioners face the problem of identifying suitable research methods. This article considers a qualitative method that has the potential to offer a long-term perspective: the life story interview. Using a pilot study based upon a small, purposive sample of undergraduates from widening participation backgrounds, the method is shown to be able to generate rich insights into the learner journey. However, its successful application is dependent upon the role of the interviewer and the quality of the conversations they are able to facilitate. Drawing upon evidence from the pilot study, and derived from the interviewer's research journal and the interview transcripts, the practices that facilitate interviewee engagement are explored. The article concludes by reflecting on the comparative strengths of the life story interview, whilst also acknowledging its value as part of a mixed-methods approach.

Keywords: evaluation; long-term impact; life-story interviews

Introduction

A central concern for practitioners and others involved in widening higher education participation is in determining the impact of outreach interventions. In its guidance to English higher education institutions [HEIs], the Office for Fair Access [OFFA: the independent regulator for higher education access] observes that it is by means of 'appropriate evaluation' that universities will be able to 'prioritise the delivery of activities that have the greatest impact' (OFFA, 2015). Similarly, the importance of evaluation is recognised by Bowes et al. (2013) in their international study, where it is noted that 'rigorous and consistent evaluation of widening participation [WP] interventions is necessary to establish programme effectiveness'. Indeed, one of the study's 'issues for consideration' is the need for evaluation to play 'a greater role at both national and institutional levels' (Bowes et al, 2013).

In advocating evaluation particular emphasis is placed upon determining the long-term effect of WP activity. Here, Bowes et al. (2013) refer to 'longitudinal analysis', whilst the importance of providing evidence of long-term impact is emphasised in OFFA and the Higher Education Funding Council for England's [HEFCE] (2014) guidance to HEIs on completing their annual monitoring returns. In this HEIs are asked to assess the levels of impact they 'are gaining from their evaluation work' in relation to Kirkpatrick's model. This distinguishes between short-term consequences - 'how participants feel about their experience' and what has been learnt - and the long-term impact of 'how far learning is applied and results in personal change' (Dent et al, 2013). Such encouragement can be set against a tendency for current evaluation work to focus on the short-term (Dent et al., 2013, p. 11). Silver (2004) offers an explanation for this, noting the established use of student questionnaires to gather course feedback.

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Yet, there is a rationale for conducting long-term evaluation. Dent et al. (2013) observe that only this form of evaluation can 'show what happens as a result of a programme', whilst it is claimed that this is 'the kind of information' valued by 'stakeholders and funders'. Similarly, Silver (2004) suggests that it represents an important decision-making tool for policymakers. Arguably, a further reason for focusing on the long-term impact of WP initiatives derives from recent requests that HEIs do more outreach with younger learners (OFFA, 2015).

However, a key challenge to evaluating in this way concerns identifying suitable research methods. It is in this context that one can appreciate OFFA and HEFCE's (2014) interest in discovering more about the methodologies HEIs use to assess long-term impact, and their intention to 'disseminate' some of the 'examples' provided. Similarly, in their international study Bowes et al. (2013) note the value of 'good practice sharing in the evaluation of access activities across sector and institutional boundaries'.

The life story interview
This article considers a qualitative method that has the potential to offer a long-term perspective on the impact of outreach work: the life story interview (Raven, 2015). For Atkinson (2002), this represents a 'research tool that is gaining much interest and use in many disciplines', and one able to highlight 'the most important influences [and] experiences' of an interviewee's life. Similarly, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) describe it as 'a potentially powerful method for understanding another's life story'. In form, it represents a type of semi-structured interview, 'organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions' and complemented by the posing of supplementary questions that are informed by the interviewee's replies (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). This approach, it is argued, enables 'the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters' (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Harrell & Bradley, 2009; Hannan, 2007). Whilst there are similarities in its exploration of the past, the life story interview can be distinguished from oral history. The latter, it is observed, 'need only cover an earlier period' of an interviewee's life, rather than exploring a life story that runs to the 'present' (UK Data Service, 2015).

In terms of its potential to explore the impact of WP interventions, it is argued that this approach can be used to investigate specific social, cultural and historical issues through an individual's experiences (UK Data Service), whilst Atkinson (2002) suggests that this method affords a chance 'to hear the life stories of [those] from under-represented groups'. In addition, Lake et al. (2014) draw attention to a promising precedent, in reporting 'pioneering' work conducted by Aimhigher Hampshire and Isle of Wight, which used 'a life history approach to evaluate the success of the [area's] widening access programme'. The aim 'was to move beyond the short and medium-term measures of activity impact to examining the longer-term effects of the whole Aimhigher experience on target groups'. Although the research was beginning to produce some 'interesting results', the 'cessation of Aimhigher cut short further development of the method' (Lake et al. 2014; 2004). [Aimhigher was a 'key component of government policy to widen participation' in England between 2004 and 2011, HEFCE, 2008: 2, 12-13].

Approach and method
A pilot study was used to test the potential of the life story interview. van Teijlingen et al. (2001) argue that pilot studies can play a 'crucial' role in informing researchers about research processes. More particularly, Sampson (2004) highlights the benefits of using such studies in qualitative research, including in refining and developing 'research instruments'. Yet, it is argued that they are 'under discussed [and] underused' (van Teijlingen et al. 2001), with 'few examples found of researchers reporting the systematic use of pilots in qualitative work' (Sampson, 2004). Acknowledging this gap, the pilot study discussed in this article was based upon the interviews I conducted with three undergraduate students from WP

backgrounds studying at a university in the English East Midlands. Whilst small, the sample size is consistent with similar studies (Marshall, 1996, Webber, 2014, 2014, Edwards, 2013). The selection of these students is best described as purposive (Coyne, 1997), with all coming from neighbourhoods with low rates of HE progression (HEFCE, 2015). In terms of gender, two were female and one male, whilst ethnically one was black British and two white British.

In reporting the findings from interviews, Potter and Hepburn (2005) advocate acknowledging the process by which participants were recruited and noting what they were told about the objectives of the research. Accordingly, those interviewed were from a group of student mentors and were approached about being interviewed via email. This explained the aim of the research and added that the findings 'would help inform' WP practice. The email also stated a particular interest in gaining the insights of those who had participated in outreach activities whilst at school. What was required from volunteers was also outlined: to be interviewed in person by the researcher at a time convenient to them. Finally, the communication made clear that 'any information [used] from these interviews would be anonymised'. However, it should be acknowledged that there are limitations with an approach dependent upon volunteers. Yow (2005) notes the tendency for 'the articulate to come forward', although it is added that 'the same reservations apply to most interviewing projects'. Interviews were held during October 2014, with each participant interviewed once.

In terms of data capture, interview transcripts were a key source, whilst email feedback received from interviewees following their interviews was used to gather their reflections on the experience itself (Selwyn & Robson, 1998). A further source used was the research journal, which, Borg (2001) observes, 'provides a record of the researcher's experiences during a project'.

Arguably, research journals constitute a particularly valuable source of data in qualitative research, where the researcher is often the research instrument (Newbury, 2001, p. 4). In terms of composition, both Newbury (2001) and Burgess (1981) identify three components likely to comprise a research journal. The first is a description of the research event. For Newbury (2001) this element derives from 'observational notes', whilst for Burgess (1981) it represents the 'first substantive account of events observed and informants interviewed'. The second component is concerned with methodology. For Burgess (1986), this is about capturing the 'researcher's involvement in the situation and the methods of investigation employed'. Newbury (2001) acknowledges the significance of this section in noting that 'the quality of data gathered is intimately related to the quality of relationships the researcher is able to establish with informants in the field'. Here, the journal provides a medium where interactions are considered (Newbury, 2001), and where the researcher's role in the 'research experience' is recognised (Borg, 2001). Both Newbury and Burgess also discuss the research journal's theoretical or analytical component. For Newbury (2001), theoretical notes are concerned with deriving 'meaning' from observational recordings, whilst for Burgess (1981) the analytical account comes from the questions the researcher poses 'in the course of conducting [the] research', and the 'ideas' that emerge for 'organising the data'.

The research journal I kept for the pilot study performed all three roles. Initially, it was used to record procedures for recruiting interviewees, as well as background information on the setting up of interviews. The journal also had a significant methodological component to it, which included reflections on the interview process itself. Completed after each interview, these explored what had gone well in facilitating engagement and data generation and the reasons for this. Consideration was also given to what had not gone so well and why, along with ideas for improvements and actions that could be taken to implement these (Raven, 2011, 2014a). These notes also had a reflexive aspect to them, where consideration was given to my impact on the data generated. In this respect, Roller (2012) suggests that the use of a journal enables 'the interviewer' to record 'details of how he or she may have influenced the results of each interview.' By doing so, it is added, the 'journal sensitizes the

interviewer to his or her prejudices and subjectivities.' For the pilot study, this included reflecting on the possible influence of my background in the way I approached interviews. Although I had no family history in HE and was from a state school, my experience of the English education system, as a white British male in his 40s, was likely to have been very different to that of the 20 year olds being interviewed.

Equally, I was also aware of my position as a WP practitioner. Although there is an expectation from the regulators of institutional access that practitioners will play an active part in conducting evaluations, concerns have been raised about this role (OFFA, 2013, p. 28). These are linked to the idea that practitioners may have a vested interest in a particular set of outcomes (McWillian, 2004; Gorard et al, 2006). That said, Chilosi et al. (2009) argue that practitioner-researchers are capable of adopting a critical perspective - something that can be facilitated by engaging with the wider literature (Booker and Macpherson, 1999). My background as an academic may have helped in this respect, with the journal also being used to capture notes from my secondary reading. Moreover, Clark and Bell (2012, p. 113) suggest that practitioners possess a more detailed understanding 'of practice than external researchers'. Consequently, their research can be 'more insightful'. Accordingly, for this study I was able to draw on 13 years of experience working in outreach. Indeed, there were occasions when my knowledge of the outreach schemes mentioned by interviewees proved useful in facilitating their recall and in formulating follow-up questions addressing the extent to which these initiatives had met their intended objectives. In addition, Chilosi, et al. (2009) claim that practitioner-researchers have the advantage of being able to access key witnesses, especially other practitioners. For the pilot study liaising with the practitioner who oversaw the mentoring programme from which volunteers derived proved straightforward. Additionally, through my contacts I was able to find quiet and conveniently located interview rooms on the university campus (Gill et al., 2008; Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

Data analysis

Accepting the premise that the researcher's role is crucial in determining the quality of the data gathered, analysis focused on exploring the practices I adopted as the interviewer. This included reviewing the interview transcripts to gain an insight into the nature of the questions asked and the character of answers received. In particular, consideration was given to questions that generated rich, detailed responses: how were they phrased and constructed? However, it was also recognised that the transcripts only captured what was verbalised. For a consideration of body language and details of the interview setting, as well as my reflections after each interview, the research journal was analysed. Here, analysis was concerned with identifying themes and patterns in what was considered to have worked well and not so well, along with ideas for improving practice. A process of memoing was used to sort and categorise excerpts (Burke et al. 2011; Cronin, 2012). The emerging themes were also informed by notes made from reviewing the secondary literature. In this respect, attention was paid to instances where the research findings were consistent with, added to, or contrasted with the secondary sources. It can be noted that the approach to data analysis adopted in this study is consistent with that outlined by DiCicco-Bloom (2006) and Borg (2001), with the latter describing a process of 'identifying relationships' in the reflective accounts captured in the research journal.

Results

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They proved able to generate a significant amount of data, with transcripts ranging from 8,200 to 11,900 words in length. Initial impressions logged in the research journal indicate that the method was able to capture detailed insights into each interviewee's 'learner journey'. This included accounts of university outreach and recruitment activities they had been involved with, and the impact of these activities. The interviews were also able to explore other influences on the interviewees' educational careers. These included the role that particular teachers played in

recognising their potential, along with the influence of peers and older siblings. Beyond this, all three discussed the positive role that parents had played. Whilst not possessing first-hand experience of HE, reference was made to the value parents placed upon education and the provision of a home environment conducive to study.

In addition, all three commented on the value of the interview experience in terms of self-discovery (UK Data Service). Interviewee two observed that the interview had got them 'thinking about how I got here', which, it was added, proved 'really weird.' Asked 'weird in what way?' the interviewee replied that 'I didn't know I was influenced by all these people, I didn't realise!' Meanwhile, interviewee three observed that 'I've talked more than I thought I would about school', adding that 'to be honest, until you asked, I didn't think about all that. It was nice going down memory lane and [exploring] the influences'. Similarly, in their email reply interviewee one stated that 'I really enjoyed the chat. It was interesting finding out what truly motivates me.' In terms of the approach adopted, the same interviewee observed that 'I like the fact I was given the opportunity to direct the flow of the conversation.'

Structure

In reviewing the interview process and the practices that helped generate rich data, the first area considered was the structure that the conversations adopted. Whilst the aim was for interviewees to inform the direction of conversations, some structure to questioning was deemed appropriate to enable cross-case comparisons. In this respect, MacAdams (2008) discusses the use of key 'chapters' in someone's life story, whilst it is also suggested that the life story approach 'facilitates organisation' (UK Data Service, 2015). Accordingly, the initial aim in planning the interviews was to explore phases in the educational careers of interviewees. Analysis of the research journal's entries on aspects of practice judged to have worked well suggests that this proved a suitable structure.

A consideration of the interview transcripts provides further insights. All three interviews commenced with an introductory phase, in which I, as the interviewer, provided a rationale for the study, confirmed arrangements for ensuring anonymity, and checked that interviewees were happy for the conversation to be recorded. This opening phase is consistent with that outlined by Harrell and Bradley (2009), where 'the interview process' is explained, the subject area to be covered introduced, and 'issues of confidentiality and consent addressed.' The next phase involved gathering basic facts about each interviewee, including their year of study and the course they were on, as well as information associated with their WP credentials, including the geographical area they were from, their family background and whether they had been on any outreach interventions at school. This approach is in line with recommendations made by Gill et al. (2008), who advocate starting 'with questions that participants can answer easily' in order to place them 'at ease [and] build up [their] confidence'. It is added that such questions can help inform the rest of the interview. Accordingly, the research journal noted how what was outlined in this early phase was often returned to and developed as the conversation progressed.

As indicated, the main section of the interview explored each interviewee's educational career, commencing with their pre-school experiences, before moving onto primary and then secondary school, with the latter divided into pre and post-16 educational experiences. What became evident in adopting this approach was that themes would naturally emerge that could then be explored in detail. Whilst over the course of each interview certain common subjects were discussed, such as the influence of family members and the role of particular teachers, when they were raised varied. This main component of the interview was followed by a section seeking interviewees' views on the interventions that they had experienced and, in looking back on their educational careers, asking about additional interventions that might have benefitted them and their peers.

The final element of each conversation explored interviewees' experience of the interview itself, before checking once again permissions around data use and concluding by thanking them for their time. This accords with Harrell and Bradley's (2009) recommendation to finish interviews on a 'positive note'. Beyond this, Gill et al. (2008) suggest that this is an appropriate time to ask interviewees if there is 'anything they would like to add', which, it is suggested, 'can often lead to the discovery of unanticipated information'. This approach was adopted in the pilot study but did not generate much new information, perhaps reflecting the fact that it may have been construed as rather ambiguous. An alternative option noted in the journal would be to pose this question when discussing a particular subject and as a mechanism for providing the interviewee with an opportunity to offer additional insights.

This said, the research journal made various suggestions for improving the structure adopted. Reflections on the first and second interviews referred to the need to provide a 'little more explanation about what each of the phases mean'. The journal also discussed the benefits of applying this structure flexibly and 'not worrying about' whether it is being strictly adhered to. Here mention was made to me, as the interviewer, gaining 'confidence to go with flow [of the conversation], ask impromptu questions as [they arise], and [to] then return' to the general chronological structure. As an illustration, the journal offered the example of the second interviewee's discussion about the influence of an older brother on their very early interest in a particular subject. This was first mentioned during the discussion about their secondary school experience.

Trust and rapport

A number of writers emphasise the importance for interviewers to establish a rapport with interviewees. For DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), this involves showing 'respect for the interviewee and the information' they share. In terms of approach, Gill et al. (2008) argue that 'establishing rapport with participants prior to the interview' is an important initial step, 'as this can have a positive effect on the interview' itself. This objective was sought in the pilot study, where I introduced myself and outlined the process prior to the start of the recorded interview. Additionally, Gill et al. (2008) discuss the importance of continuing to build rapport once the interview is underway. One suggestion to facilitate this is 'for the interviewer to familiarise themselves with the interview schedule, so that the process appears more natural and less rehearsed'. Again, this was done for the pilot study where the semi-structured approach allowed flexibility in the range of questions asked.

Helped by these tactics, the research journal identified rapport building as an aspect of practice that worked well, with reference made to 'adapting questions to each interviewee'. Elsewhere, the benefit was noted of 'not rushing into the process' but, instead, allowing time for the building of 'rapport through general conversation, as well as ensuring that the 'value of [the interviewee's] contribution' was acknowledged. Similarly, the act of 'smiling and adopting a conversational approach' was also identified as helping to cultivate a sense of trust and rapport, whilst humour used in the right context was found to place interviewees at 'ease'. However, the journal also identified this as an area for improvement. Notes from the first interview referred to the 'need to check when the interviewee has to be away by', and to clarifying the expected length of the interview.

In addition, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) discuss the possible impact of differences in social position between the interviewee and interviewer on building trust and rapport. Similarly, Atkinson (2002) refers to the 'power factor between [the two] parties'. This said, it is also observed 'that people tend to want to tell their stories the way they happened, in their own voices, regardless of who is asking questions' (Atkinson, 2002). Moreover, it can be suggested that it is possible to discern from the nature of the interaction when differences in social position are being overcome. Here, Miller and Glassner (2004) cite the practice of 'talk-back' associated with interviewees having the confidence to offer

corrections and highlight an interviewer's misinterpretations. Such behaviour is also considered to be a sign that the data produced will be of good quality.

The potential difference in social position between the interviewees and myself was reflected upon in the research journal. Whilst not involved in the mentoring scheme that brought volunteers into contact with the department, I was a manager in that section and was potentially perceived as such. However, an analysis of the interview transcripts and journal entries provides examples of the practices and behaviours mentioned by Miller and Glassner (2004). In this respect, the second interviewee provided a correction regarding the location of their primary school - in the southwest part of the city, not the north. There were also a number of occasions across the three interviews when interviewees completed a sentence I had started. For example, in seeking to confirm whether the teacher being discussed was the same person mentioned earlier in the conversation, I began to ask the question 'Mr [Jones] is the one that', before interviewee three stepped in to complete the sentence: 'Mr [Jones] is that teacher who was very keen on promoting engineering skills'. Elsewhere, examples were identified of the practice of interviewees checking that I understood what I was being told. This, it can be suggested, requires a degree of confidence, since interviewees are taking on a guiding and informing role (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Facilitating reflection

For Atkinson (2002), a central component of effective life storytelling is reflective thinking. Here the interviewer's role is to facilitate reflection and 'encourage [the interviewee to] pull out the story's inherent meaning'. Whilst Atkinson does not detail strategies that can be used to promote reflection, a number of practices proved effective in the pilot study. Here, the research journal talked about 'allowing time [and] space for interviewees to think', and noted the interviewer's ability to 'recognise when interviewees might be reflecting [and] thinking things through', and ensuring they were not interrupted during this process. Another approach discussed by Gill et al. (2008) is to encourage interviewees to reflect on certain 'remarks' they make. Harrell and Bradley (2009) suggest that repeating a word or phrase used by the interviewee can trigger such reflection This device was deployed in each of the pilot study interviews and did initiate reflection and encourage elaboration. In discussing the positive experience of attending a university visit day, interviewee one observed how the staff and students supporting the event had 'won them over'. In repeating the words 'they won you over', and adding 'how did they win you over?' I was able to prompt the interviewee into discussing the quality of the talks attended, how the student helpers gave their perspective on the university, and how attendees were encouraged to participate in an undergraduate project by completing a questionnaire. In sum, it was noted, the event 'really engaged us'.

Similarly, Gill et al. (2008) suggest asking respondents to explain what they meant by a particular phrase. This practice was also adopted in the pilot study. In discussing being 'brought up in a sheltered environment', interviewee one was asked 'what do you mean by sheltered environment?' This promoted a detailed reply that provided insights into the influence of parents and attitudes of close friends. Indeed, the reflections captured in the journal considered this aspect of practice to have worked particularly well. Here, reference was made to the 'checking of interpretations and meanings', and to my practice of summarising what I understood the interviewee to have said, and asking questions around the accuracy of the interpretation and if any elements were missing from this summary.

Yet, areas for improvement were also identified. Notes from the first interview discussed the need to allow time and pauses in the conversation for reflection to occur. Here Gill et al. (2008) note 'the strategic use of silence'. If used appropriately, silence can 'be highly effective at getting [interviewees] to contemplate their responses.' This accepted, the research journal discussed the need to judge when silence is most appropriately applied, with reference made to receiving visual cues that respondents are thinking and actively reflecting

(see following section). In addition, it can be suggested that silence may be most effectively used once rapport has been established and interviewees are comfortable with the process.

A further skill explored in the literature is that of listening. For Gill et al. (2008) 'the ability to listen attentively to what is being said [constitutes] one of the most important skills' since it enables 'participants to recount their experiences as fully as possible without unnecessary interruptions'. Similarly, Woods (2006) notes that by engaging in 'active listening' the researcher 'shows the interviewee that close attention is being paid to what they say', whilst for Harrell and Bradley (2009) listening 'closely to the respondent' enables the interviewer to 'determine when follow-up is needed'. One benefit arising from careful listening reported in the research journal was in my consequent ability 'to remember what has been said earlier [in the interview] and to mention it again at an appropriate time'. This practice, it was noted, 'encouraged further insights to be offered'.

Non-verbal communication

Recognising and working with non-verbal cues and body language is another interviewer skill identified by commentators that can encourage engagement and facilitate rapport. For Gill et al. (2008) this includes 'nodding, smiling, looking interested and making encouraging noises during the interview'. Additionally, Harrell and Bradley (2009) suggest that 'some non-verbal behaviours can be used as probes or [to] help direct the interview'. For instance, 'a quizzical look by the interviewer can encourage the respondent to provide more detail or give more explanation'. References to non-verbal communication featured in the reflective notes captured after each interview. Amongst the aspects of practice considered to have worked well in the first and second interviews were my verbal references to the interviewee's facial expressions, with a corresponding question posed to check that the interpretation was correct. Here the notes added that there was 'lots of confirmation and agreement about what [I thought I] was seeing'. This said, reflections on the third interview included a reminder of the need to 'maintain an awareness' of visual cues, and to think about my own body language in the process.

Validity

A central concern of qualitative interviews is with the validity of the data generated. Here, Atkinson (2002) discusses the importance of internal consistency - what is said in 'one part of the narrative' does not 'contradict what [is said] in another part'. In this respect, amongst the practices judged to have been effective in the pilot study were the checks used to determine internal consistency. My ability to do this was, in turn, linked to being able to listen attentively and recall what had been said in earlier parts of the conversation.

Further impacting upon the validity of data generated by methods that rely on a subject's ability to recall is that of memory. In discussing oral evidence, Riddick (1995) observers that 'people [may] forget or confuse much of the precise detail of their experience', or 'may over-simplify or exaggerate their role'. However, it is suggested that this issue is not likely to be as significant in life story interviews, since these are less preoccupied with capturing historical events and detailed 'facts' (Lummins, 1988). Beyond this, Yow (2005) argues that 'a person's ability to recall depends on factors such as the topic under consideration, why the question is asked, and the willingness of the narrator to participate.' Since those participating in the pilot study were volunteers who were informed of the objectives of the research, there are grounds for reassurance regarding the latter observations. In terms of the former, Yow (2005) suggests that 'memories of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood may be more easily recalled than those from middle and later years', whilst it is also observed that 'memory researchers have found that if the event or situation was significant to the individual, it will likely be remembered in detail.'

Evidence from the interview transcripts produced in the pilot study offers reason to believe that participants were able to recall key aspects of their 'learner journey'. Whilst discussing their secondary school experience, interviewee three observed that **'I remember very vividly the assembly we had to introduce UCAS'** [the UK University and College Admissions Service], later making reference to the '25 slides' in the accompanying presentation that explored 'how you get to university'. In addition, Lummins (1988) argues that oral evidence 'should be a good deal more informative' than other 'forms of personal testimony because it is the product of two people'. In this respect, analysis of the interview transcripts identified various occasions when the interaction between interviewer and interviewee helped to enable recall. Following a question about the nature of a particular outreach mentoring scheme, interviewee two replied 'yes, I remember now', before outlining the process by which they came to hear about the scheme.

Reflections

A consideration of the type of data generated by other methods that have been used to evaluate WP activities underpins the argument that the life story interview can provide new insights into the impact of outreach activity. In my own work use has been made of end-of-year questionnaires to capture the reflections of students on the longer-term effect of interventions (Raven, 2014b). Whilst accounts provided in free text boxes have proved valuable, they are necessarily limited to the pre-set questions posed. Additionally, Rickinson (2005) notes that such questions can be misinterpreted or left unanswered, whilst responses can be superficial, with the underlying reasons remaining unexplored. Although focus groups have been used to overcome some of these challenges (Rickinson, 2005; Raven, 2014b), they also have their limitations. Gibbs (1997) observes that it is 'difficult for the researcher to identify an individual message' and to piece together their particular story, whilst 'focus group discussion may [also] discourage some people from trusting others with personal information'.

In my department use has also been made of reflective accounts completed by participants sometime after an event has occurred and which seek to capture their assessment of its more lasting effects. These can provide more detailed intervention descriptions than those offered by life story interviews, as well as afford insights into how participation has begun to impact on educational intentions. Whilst this approach could be developed to enable current university students to reflect on the longer-term impact of WP activities, it is likely to encounter the same kinds of limitation that afflict questionnaires. Indeed, for me one of the key discoveries from the pilot study was the role the interviewer could play in facilitating reflection. This included placing the impact of outreach interventions into the context of an interviewee's other influences and experiences. Similarly, the decision by Goldman et al. (2003) to use life story interviews to explore 'people's health perceptions and behaviours' was informed by the fact that 'traditional public health research provided only a limited understanding of contextual factors that facilitate or constrain individuals' abilities to maintain their health'. Lim (2011) also selected this approach because of its potential to explore 'the complex, interlaced identities of ethnic minority women living in Britain'.

Studies that have deployed life story interviews also help to illustrate how findings can be presented. Whilst this article has adopted a thematic approach by marshalling the evidence from the three interviews under a number of headings, Lim (2011) presents her findings in two individual case studies. Although Bird (2010) also presents a series of case studies that address the 'role of education in supporting livelihood resilience in conflict affected northern Uganda', these accounts are accompanied by timelines depicting 'key events' in each person's 'life course'.

In addition, Bird's (2010) study provides an example of how life story interviews can be used as part of a mixed-methods approach (Dent et al., 2013). In this case, use was also made of focus group discussions to 'explore particular themes', and 'key informant

interviews', including with 'district officials', to provide an 'overview of population movements [and] educational service provision' (Bird, 2010). Similarly, one option being explored following the pilot study is to seek volunteer interviewees from amongst those identified by a quantitative study that matched outreach participants with subsequent university applicants.

Conclusion

Much importance is now placed upon evaluating widening participation interventions, both in the UK and internationally. Whilst there is value in assessing the immediate consequences of such activity, the policy imperative is on determining the long-term impact. Against this backdrop lies the challenge of identifying research methods that are able to afford such insights. To this end, this study has considered the life story interview. Whilst under-utilised in WP work, the method's potential has been confirmed in other fields.

To determine its suitability in the WP arena, this article reported on the findings from a pilot study based upon interviews with a small, purposive sample of widening participation students who had progressed to HE. These interviews were able to generate rich data about respondents' experiences and the impact of the interventions they had participated in. Beyond this, and based upon the premise that in qualitative research the researcher is the principal research instrument, the article explored practices that can be adopted by the interviewer to maximise the quality of the data generated.

Whilst advocating the life story interview as an instrument for investigating the long-term impact of outreach interventions, this study also recognised how it can be used in harness with other methods. Equally, however, the wider potential of this methodology should be acknowledged, in being capable of identifying other influences impacting on an individual's progression through the education system. With calls for the sharing of practice, including research methods able to cast light on the long-term impact of outreach initiatives, it is hoped that the findings and suggestions arising from this study will be of value to fellow practitioners and others concerned with widening participation.

Acknowledgements

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