

## **GENDERED LEARNING BIOGRAPHIES: BECOMING A TEACHER IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION**

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***Abstract.** Research presented in the paper focuses on learning biographies and professional identity development of 14 female and male teachers at university colleges in Norway. Biographical narratives reveal subjective accounts and perception of gender roles and it exposes interaction of formal, non-formal, informal experiential learning in different cultural contexts (journeys), combination of learning, work and family life. Learning as a lifelong process is inter-woven with distribution of power in society, social stratification, structural economic and labour market processes, social identities (including gender) and relation between various spheres of social life (public and private, work, family and learning, etc.). In the settings of late modernity globalisation and the process of disembedding mechanisms of social institutions allow individuals to experience new cultures, new lifestyles and feel disembedded and detached from institutions. Internationalization of higher education is an example of empowering detachment mechanisms, when people choose to learn in different cultural settings and develop intercultural competence through experiential learning. The aim of the paper is to analyse (re)construction of self-identity in biographical narratives and conceptualize male and female learning biographies and learning paths in becoming teachers in multicultural education.*

***Keywords:** biographical narrative, biographical research, educational trajectories, gender, gendered biographies, intercultural competence learning biographies.*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in study of life histories and biographical research which is a unique methodology that sheds light on processes of lifelong learning and construction of professional identity. This kind of research reveals educational trajectory and learning biography as inseparable from life trajectory. Biographical narrative analyses an interaction of formal, non-formal and informal learning and social processes, combination of learning, work and family life (West, 2011). Biographical research exposes individual lives within social context, scrutinizes connection between biography

and social structure (C.W. Mills' notion of sociological imagination), uncovers how events in individual lives (social and geographic mobility, acquired skills and competences, interruption of work activity due to illness, maternity, unemployment etc.) intersect with social and economic structural changes and transformations (Mažeikienė & Dorelaitienė, 2013). Scholars analysing educational trajectories and learning biographies point out that learning as a lifelong process is inter-woven with distribution of power in society, social stratification, structural economic and labour market processes, social identities (including gender) and relation between various spheres of social life (public and private, relation between work, family and learning, etc.)

Along with understanding of interconnection of individual lives and social structures, a shift from objectivist and positivist standpoint toward interpretative approach has been made in biographical research during last decades. Phenomenological, ethno methodological, interactionist and psychoanalytic theories created a framework to envisage biographical narrative as a form of subjective reality with subjective experiences and interpretations, meanings of personal life (motivations, accounts and situational definitions) (Roberts, 2002). Autobiography is a subjective reconstruction and interpretation of one's own life. In this regard social structures and processes, changes and transformations in society are explored in biographical narrative through lenses of subjective interpretations and within horizon of meanings of individual.

Interconnection of objective social structural changes and subjective processes in biographical narrative are conceptualised by Anthony Giddens (1991) in his concept of the self as a reflexive project. Referring to Giddens' theory, learning and educational trajectories could be illuminated in relation to construction and transformations of self-identity in the post-traditional order of high and late modernity. In the settings of late modernity dynamism (reorganising of time and space, acceleration in time-space distancing), globalisation and the process of disembedding mechanisms of social institutions, autobiographical narrative as an interpretative self-history becomes a way to build and rebuild a coherent and rewarding sense of self-identity (Giddens, 1991). In the autobiographical narrative the coherence of the self-identity derives from a cognitive awareness of the various phases of the lifespan and integration of life experiences. It is formed by creating a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. Autobiographical narrative helps sustaining ontological security and basic trust; it becomes a space of deliberation and negotiation of transitions, turning-points, choices made and risks taken in the life. In this sense autobiographical narrative becomes a psychotherapy and way to overcome personal meaninglessness, feelings of uncertainty, loss and anxiety in the unbearable complexity and plurality of possible options and choices in the late modernity: "Negotiating a significant transition in life, leaving home, getting

a new job, facing up to unemployment, forming a new relationship, moving between different areas or routines, confronting illness, beginning therapy - all mean running consciously entertained risks in order to grasp the new opportunities which personal crises open up” (Giddens, 1991, p. 79).

Additionally to Giddens’ theoretical considerations on (re)building and (re)construction of self-identity in biographical narrative, conceptualisation of learning biographies and educational trajectories has been enriched significantly by insights given by feminist perspective. Gender approach contributed to the understanding that learning experience is gender specific and women’s and men’s learning experiences and their subjectivities should be scrutinised. Giddens’ ideas on negotiation of self-identity in biographical narrative by deliberating and accommodating main choices, opportunities and turning points are envisaged by feminist authors through gender lenses.

Authors who seek to add gender dimension to conceptualisation of late modernity (Spano, 2002) point out increasing centrality of work in women’s biographical paths and, double-presence’ model, where family (marriage and motherhood) and work become parallel paths. During the 1980 new ‘typical’ (normative?) biographical path of women implied reconciliation of work and family. In the age of reflexive modernities individuals are no longer guided by tradition and fixed scripts. According to Spano (2002), biographical paths expose a collapse and rapture with ascription when individuals can exercise free will and make decisions, use new opportunities and enter into domain of risk. In this process of emancipation from tradition \males have more freedom and opportunities. Women feel more tensions between self-realisation and traditional roles, conflicts between reproductive and productive roles, face difficulties of reconciliation of private and public spheres.

Gender as an outcome of gender socialisation and complex social and psychodynamic processes is (re)produced and changed within the scope of accessible choices that individuals make (Weber, 2007). Women and men have different accessible choices, opportunities and risks in their lives because of differences in gender socialisation, gender identities, gender specific appropriation of social and societal demands within context of gender division of labour. As Weber (2007) states, learning biographies of women and men look differently. Male biographies are generally structured by working opportunities or careers, whereas women’s biographies are structurally defined by the material options comprising both family and wage labour or subsistence work. Women expose their biographies as complex and full of conflicting interests. Desires and motivations of individuals are inter-woven with different gendered patterns in family and work life. According to Kirsten Weber, fatherhood, reproductive tasks and family life are rarely exposed in males’ biographies. In contrary, women pay attention to these parts of their lives. Women represent and construct

their lives and identities in biographical narrative as complex and full of conflicting interests and attempts to combine career, marriage, motherhood and family life. In circumstances of late modernity when detraditionalisation and individualisation increase women feel profound pressure trying to carry out subjective mediation of ongoing social changes with more complex picture of gender division of labour in private and public spheres of life.

Kirstin Weber points out that biographies of women and men exemplify gendered patterns of subjectivities which are rather stable historical relations (differently than gender identities). They include patterns of separation and identification, autonomy and intimacy which have been formed starting from early childhood relations of male and female infants with the first caretaker (mother). As a result, the girls' path to autonomy is mediated by the intimacy in the first interactions, where the boy's path to autonomy is defined by the separation from the first intimacy. By referring to these pre- and unconscious dimension of socialisation process Weber explains men's and women's gender subjectivities and dealing with autonomy and intimacy: "men will tend to demonstrate autonomy as a precondition for intimacy, whereas women will strive to establish intimacy- and perhaps recognition – as a precondition for demonstrating autonomy" (p. 97). This psychodynamic theory correlates with theoretical framework on gender differences in primary identification, differentiation and individuation provided by Nancy Chodorow in her work on "Reproduction of Mothering" (1978). Conceptualisations described above delineate nature of biographical narrative as a form of subjective reality with gendered experiences and interpretations, specific gendered responses to new learning and career opportunities and challenges of late modernity. The objective of the study is to analyse (re)construction of self-identity in biographical narratives and conceptualize male and female learning biographies and learning paths in becoming teachers in multicultural education.

### **Methods for data collection and analysis**

The professionals in Norway who were willing to participate in the research were scheduled for a interview that followed a format of biographical research interview. Data were collected and analyzed by applying biographical narrative research which helped analyze events not only as objective facts, but also as subjective interpretation of professional biography and subjective reconstruction of personal professional development and education. Participants of our research were asked to answer the following question: *Could you tell us please from the beginning what were the events in your life that has influence your decision to become a teacher in intercultural education?* The biographical interviews were digitally recorded and approximately 75 pages of field notes were taken. There

were 14 interviews that were conducted, each of which lasted between 55 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. At the end of each interview, the interviewees were asked to tell shortly demographic data (age, place of birth, dates of professional development). They were told that information they shared would be protected by a confidentiality principle, the names and other likely identification aspects would be altered. Themes and categories were not predetermined as participants were able to construct their own narratives. During biographical interviews and analysis, the postmodern perspective was taken into account, where there are simultaneous constructions and performances of realities based on knowledge that is contextual, historically situated, discursively produced and constituted within networks of power (Gannon & Davies, 2007).

The digital recordings were transcribed word-for-word. The transcripts and digital recordings were utilized together throughout the content analysis process. During this process, we themed and sorted categories and subcategories from the interviews data using quotes from the research data. Participants of the research male (8) and female (6) are the subjects that reflect transformations of self-identity in the post-traditional order of late modernity.

### **Journey as learning opportunity**

Interculturality, internationalization of higher education institutions, international cooperation, studies abroad, study exchange programmes have open opportunities in learners lives, which were exposed in the narratives of the research participants. The possibility to travel and develop intercultural competence through experiential learning was an important topic in the narratives of the research participants, which has changed cultural understanding, way of thinking and learning paths of the interviewees.

*“I learnt to think in intercultural terms, I have become so much aware of the cultural relationships between the Polynesians and myself, before that between myself and the Russians, who are different from me in many ways and then how different it was to be Polynesian in Polynesia then being a Polynesian in New Zealand, so I suddenly realized, that I have a lot of intercultural competence that I could very easily make use of encountering a totally new culture here in my country” (Arnold, 55).*

Analyzing the narrative of one of research participant, it was noticed that choices concerning traveling has influenced his learning path and personal life:

*“I really enjoyed travelling, my family did not travel, so I had to do that by my own and it has started when I was a teenager, I travelled in Europe and I travelled in Latin America and I realized that I want to be a world person” (Toren, 38).*

These experiences opened up the new understanding of diversity, uncertainty, shaped new approach to otherness, fostered self-development:

*“Going abroad I felt I was growing in that year in France, because I didn’t have high confidence contacting people I didn’t know, but I realized that I just have to do that and I was successful”*(Carla, 42).

Life events inter-woven with learning experiences and broadened horizons of research participants’ intercultural competence. Experiential learning abroad also develops important elements of intercultural competence elements – values and attitudes (empathy, tolerance, curiosity, openness to otherness, tolerance to uncertainty):

*“I think that I have in my experience developed a sense of empathy or a sense of imagining what it’s like to be the other person encountering problems”*(Arnold, 55) .

### **Social mobility and experiential learning**

Social and geographic mobility and facing otherness was exposed by the research participants. Experiential learning situations, that were experienced by participants developed their intercultural competence, raised intercultural awareness and understanding of social and economic diversity, different lifestyles:

*“When I travelled to Latin America and looking back these 6 months I think that I was so naïve, but that is really strong experience for myself, as you meet poverty and people want to trick you and I had big conflicts with this girl at the end I travelled with, we had a very good stay but it was the beginning of the end of our friendship”* (Carla, 42).

Experienced situations opened new feelings while meeting people from the other social classes:

*“For me, being middle class person, from the western side of town, having good economy and very nice parents and good family... I met these manual workers - guys and I think that was fascinating, so different from me”* (Johanson, 67).

At the same time, internationalization of higher education institutions, possibilities to do the internships, field work abroad, student and teacher exchange programmes in Europe and worldwide allowed making choices, which enriched learning path of the participants and opened new possibilities for learning and professional development:

*“When I started my teacher training here in 1995, I very quickly explored the possibilities of doing something abroad while I was studying. So I did one semester abroad as Erasmus exchange programme to Madrid and then for my 4th year I studied in England the entire year. I also did my master’s degree in the US, I was at the American University in Washington DC studying International Relations there, which was very perspective”* (Toren,38).

In the settings of late modernity globalization and processes of disembedding mechanisms of social institutions allow people to experience new cultures, new lifestyles and feel detached from the institutions. Internationalization of higher education is an example of empowering detachment mechanisms, when people choose to learn in different cultural

settings and across institutions. One of the aspects singled out by the research participants was that institutions nowadays even encourage temporary detachments (for example 1-2 years), which allow person gaining new competences in different learning environments (schools, business organizations, ministries, etc.):

*„Institution as an institution is interested that the people would have good life, if you want to try something – try it and you can do for a year or two and they would have the same position held for you, and when you come back, you bring some new knowledge” (Tracy, 66).*

Sometimes the decisions and choices open new understanding of the career development and possibilities to use gained practice and competences in labour market. One of the female participant made a choice to study Physical therapy, but her life-long dream was to study Social anthropology and when the dream came true, she understood that these two choices led her to gain high qualification and professional satisfaction:

*“When I was studying social anthropology I saw rather fast that for me it was so much easier to do field works, than for my younger colleagues that never been working with people, never tried communicate with people. To combine these two professions is rather good. It gives you something extra” (Tracy, 66).*

### **Combining learning, career and family**

An important topic of career and family balance was analysed in the narratives of the research participants. An attempt by individuals to reconcile learning, career, marriage, motherhood and family life is represented in the research data. Difficulties combining learning and motherhood was mentioned mostly in the female narratives:

*„I was working part time and studying part time and I was lucky that I read very fast and I went through very fast, it was like a journey, I didn't interact so much with the other students, I knew only few girls that were in a similar position as me, working, with children and studying” (Tracy, 66).*

Analyzing the data of the male research participant, it was mentioned difficulties combining career and family life:

*“it was quite a coincidence that I began to be teachers teacher, course I had to have a job and lived in Oslo, had 2 children and wife was working here and it was very hard to get a job at university full time so when I got this opportunity to work in this high school of teachers education it was in 1992 it was very convenient. I had to teach social science subjects and history, these were things that I was really interested” (Johanson, 67).*

Journeys while studying also influenced personal life of research participants – there was a possibility to meet their spouses. In one of the biographical narratives, female research participant met her husband of the same nationality as she in France and also there was another male research participant

story of meeting wife in Russia while traveling, who was the same nationality as the man and after long and far journeys together, they had the second baby in Australia. This person learning life path is an example of international journey's impacts on learning experience and at the same time on crucial family decisions and shaping lifestyles, involving other family members into these new opportunities in life and learning. Journeys changed family relations, helped to construct self-identity and brought awareness of role of interculturality in one's own personal and professional life:

*„So all of these sort of drastic changes, in the sense that you change the place of stay, you change jobs, the structure of the family changed as well, forming my identity both personal and professional” (Rony, 51).*

### **Gendered ascriptions in learning biographies of females**

In modernity, individuals usually are no longer guided by traditional and fixed scripts. The biographical research has revealed weaker rapture of ascription for females than males. Biographical narratives of female research participants exposed stronger traditional ascriptions of gender which were expressed in reconstructions of relations with family members. Fathers and mothers have a huge influence in choices and opportunities especially for their daughters. Female biographies and narratives are constituted around relations with parents, mostly with mothers. According to Spano (2002) biographical paths expose a collapse and rapture with ascription when individuals can exercise free will and make decisions, use new opportunities and enter into domain of risk, however in our research traditional and fixed scripts were pronounced when social master and grand narratives were expressed in the form of family discourses. Parents become significant others and try to influence choices of their children (in this case daughters):

*„I didn't have any relations in Latin America and my father was like why you have to go to the most dangerous parts of the world, because he had a lot of prejudice against Latin Americans, and I remember he was a bit shocked that you make all these choices and you never ask for me, because up till then I asked a lot him for the advice” (Carla, 42).*

The narratives uncovered traditional female attachment to mothers:

*“When I was a child I was very close to my mummy, my sister was going everywhere and I was more to my mummy and cleaning the skirts” (Interview Nr. 8).*

Stronger impact of family members on daughters is conceptualized by psychodynamic theory when females become more depended on their parents in gender socialization and gender subjectification process. One of the narratives depicted a situation when mothers' influence has changed the decisions of female research participants:



*“I was thinking about doing Development studies, but my mother have cried out - are you going to Africa, being ill”?* (Nora, 44).

Learning paths and educational biographies were differently reached, for example males had more freedom to choose their educational way and professions and often their choices were different and felt less pressure from the family and society. We can assume that cultural and social specificities of the regions are important factors of gender division.

Biographical narratives express a pressure of family and other significant others on females participated in the research. Women feel internal conflicts between the self and the internalized images of the significant others. Women feel regrets and uneasiness because they didn't respond to the expectations of their family members:

*“Still my mom, when I was working in the secondary school, lower secondary school from 13-15 years pupil, my mother was saying when are you going to get yourself a proper work? This is not a proper work. So these days I think she can accept, high school lecturer, but still she thinks I am a teacher”* (Nora, 44).

Males faced other challenges and pressures. They mentioned specific 'masculine' way of learning and knowledge production when work in masculine workplaces and work groups imply demonstration of hegemonic masculinity in academic settings – being competent, knowledgeable and professionally strong. Lack of knowledge in such contexts is perceived by others as weakness; this attitude inevitably creates obstacles for productive learning and professional development:

*“After I finished the studies at the University, I was working three months in Department of Economical History, which was business history and department was very masculine and it was very hard to say that you don't know something and don't know where to read, it was looked as weakness”* (Nora, 44).

## Conclusions

1. Learning biographies and professional identity development of female and male teachers at university colleges revealed (re)construction of self-identity in biographical narratives. In biographical accounts research participants reconstructed their memory by deliberating and accommodating main choices, opportunities and turning points in their learning path.
2. The narratives revealed that learning as a lifelong process is inter-woven with social identities (especially gender) and relation between public and private, relation between work, family and learning, etc.). Therefore the authors analyzed and presented only few themes and categories, which were pronounced in the narratives: Journey as learning opportunity; Social

- mobility and experiential learning; combination and balance between learning, career and family and Gendered ascriptions.
3. The research revealed an idea that learning experience is gender specific and women's and men's learning experiences and their subjectivities should be revealed and scrutinized. In female narratives the learning path was exposed more dramatically, with tension, balancing between family and career, losses, opportunities and choices, which were often dependent on family members (mothers and fathers) decisions. It could be analyzed by traditional and fixed scripts which are still valid because of the social dominant discourses, as well as family discourses. If even female narratives exposed apparent attachment to the family and parents, but narratives pronounced quite strong detachment of participants from institutions. In the settings of late modernity and globalization the process of disembedding mechanisms of social institutions allow people to experience new cultures, new lifestyles and feel no attachment to the institutions.
  4. Journey as learning opportunity lead to experience of diversity, develop intercultural competence and raise cultural awareness of research participants, which formed their learning path and professional development.

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