'More than our statistics, more than that social deprivation': relational narrative research and story-listening in communities with limited HE participation

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Research Domains

Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract

This paper examines the use of relational narrative research to understand the transitions of young people from education into work, in two former UK coalfields communities. A foundation of mutual respect and deep appreciation of local context and lived experiences supported the use of life-story conversations with five participant families. Preliminary findings have highlighted the significance of structures in preventing otherwise aspirational and capable young people from accessing HE, distrust of deficit-based narratives when characterising certain localities, and social disconnects faced by HE graduates living within these areas. I argue for an approach that encourages deep engagement with local people and their families, using locally-based researchers and HEI institutions to move beyond the traditional models of social and physical mobility. By working within and alongside communities, using collaborative approaches, HEIs can build trust, understand local needs and promote opportunities for local people to meet their full potential.

Full paper

Introduction
Ensuring that young people have the chance to succeed in higher education, whatever their background, is a key goal for UK higher education institutions. However, efforts to widen participation can encourage young people to leave their home communities to pursue opportunities, unintentionally worsening inequalities and a 'left behind' feeling in those who remain (Lybeck, 2023). Creating distance between HEIs and communities they aim to support risks overlooking valuable local knowledge and, ultimately, damaging the life chances of people within them.

This paper discusses a relational approach to research. It is built on a foundation of mutual respect, prioritising deep appreciations of local context and lived experiences, and embracing my practice as a researcher working and living within the study area. A

commitment to work *with* – rather than *doing something to* – local people underpins my ongoing study, funded by Universities for Nottingham Col(l)aboratory, a programme aiming to build partnerships between local researchers and local communities.

My project investigates how young people navigate transitions from education into work (ETW), exploring the family support they receive and how their identities are shaped by intergenerational influences. While we know that families play a central role in young people finding employment or not, we know less about how individual choices and wider social environments interact before, during and following the ETW transition (Pelikh & Rowe, 2024). The project seeks to understand families' experiences and how these interact with the opportunity structure available to young people in their local area to assist productive future transitions (Roberts, 2009).

Methods

My study used relational narrative research to listen to the life stories of five families in two former UK coalfield communities. My approach explored how participant's stories are shaped by lived experiences of place, time, and social connections (Clandinin, 2023). Methods employed included:

- Fourteen open life-story conversations, starting with a single prompt encouraging participants to share their experiences freely and with comfort (Rosenthal, 2004).
- Following the conversations, participants received their completed transcript, and any changes they requested were made. This "right of reply", as a key ethical principle, proved vital to the trust between the participants and myself.
- Throughout the study, I have kept a field diary with reflections and observations of my own experiences in the community. Identifying the intersection of self-experience with that of my participants accepts a position of passionate partiality as a positive influence on the study (Reay, 2017).

Preliminary Findings

A mix of HE students and alumni, and those who have never attended university, formed the core of the participant group. Their stories demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach to both HE and career advice fails to support young people and their families across the transitional period. Preliminary findings include:

- *Structures preventing aspirational students from accessing HE*:   Contextual barriers and a perceived lack of support caused some participants to believe HE was unattainable, with implications for widening participation. "University life, that wasn't really an option for me. I were never going to get there – no matter how independent or strong I was."

- *Distrust of deficit positioning*: Participants expressed feelings of indignation toward the deficit-framing often used by HEIs. One eloquently explained, "we are more than our statistics, so we are more than that social deprivation. We are more than digital poverty. We are more than a mining community that hasn't got mining."
- *The social stratification of higher education*: Even those who have successfully completed HE face potential disconnects with their families and their locality. One participant discussed her perceptions of her university-educated brother: "He might be 'up there' but he's 'down there' when he talks to me. Very often said that to him."

Implications

My preliminary findings suggest that current approaches to career guidance and efforts to widen participation in HE should be justly tailored to the communities they intend to serve. I argue that by deeply listening to participants' stories using relational narrative approaches, we gain an understanding of the intersections between local context and lived experiences of the young people and their families. This perspective is often missed by traditional, quantitative approaches to research and policy.

Rather than continuing current efforts to encourage mobility – both physical and social - in pursuit of HE ambitions, and researching from the outside-in, HEIs should act to truly engrain themselves within these left-behind communities. With central roles in the locality, they can begin the difficult journey to building trust, understanding the intricacies of local needs and local neighbourhoods, and by prioritising collaborative approaches help build opportunities to allow local people to meet their full potential.