

Background material to the report:

*Navigating difficult waters:  
learning for career and labour market transitions*  
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## **Methodology**

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## Table of contents

1. Biographical narrative interviews .....	3
2. The interviews .....	7
2.1. Research topic areas to be covered in interviews as a whole .....	8
2.2. Framing of the interviews .....	12
3. Sampling .....	13
3.1. Specification of the sample .....	14
4. Data analysis.....	18
4.1. Data preparation for analysis.....	19
4.2. Data analysis: how the analysis is layered.....	21
5. Issues of validity, generalisability, and reliability .....	24
References.....	26

## CHAPTER 1.

# Biographical narrative interviews

The core focus of the research process was qualitative and, in particular, biographical approaches and the undertaking of, and analysis of individual biographical narrative interviews. In recent years there has been ‘a turn to biographical methods’ in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) reflecting a move towards a more humanistic approach to research. This trend has also become dominant in adult education and lifelong learning research. Importantly ‘the benefits of using biographical methods are enormous for educators and learners alike. We are now more able to understand more fully the processes and experiences of learning in diverse settings and comprehend the role of learning in a person’s life as a whole, set within a historical, social and cultural imagination. As adult educators we need to listen and learn from learners’ voices – beyond consumerist rhetoric –to improve policy and practice and challenge institutional practices’ (West et al., 2007, p. 292).

Biographical approaches are also referred to as life histories, narratives or biographical narratives. In the UK these terms are generally used interchangeably. However, in some European countries distinctions are made. For example the Roskilde Life History Centre in Denmark uses the term life history which for them expresses and embeds the subjectivity of a person’s whole life while biography encapsulates the written or told account of a life. In Germany the term narrative is more common. The word narrative means telling so that a narrative story is about telling and reliving one’s past life. Whatever term is used Denzin (1989) argues that biographies reveal turning point moments or epiphanies in a person’s life. This can be equated to the concept of transition as ‘something’ happens in a person’s life which leads to reflection and change.

Biographical narrative methods generate thick description and offer in-depth insights into lived experience and of learning and career and labour market life transitions. Such an approach allows people to engage reflexively, working with researchers, to identify themes and the nature of their story telling (Merrill and West, 2009). Biographical narratives also enable participants to identify what is significant and meaningful to them about their past, present and future lives in relation to lifelong learning and career transitions (Merrill, 2007). Importantly, biographical narratives are not static as they highlight changes over time. The narratives may illuminate complex processes of learning, labour market experience and working-life transitions. Biographical narratives also ‘reveal the interaction between agency and structure in people’s lives’ (Alheit and Merrill,

2004, p. 152) and connect the micro and macro worlds. The narrative stories enabled us to look at how individuals use their agency in making a career transition, which in some cases may have been forced on them by structural factors such as the loss of a job.

All research methods are underpinned by theoretical perspectives. The biographical narrative approach initially drew on strands of both symbolic interactionism and feminism. As Merrill and West highlight: 'the idea of biography as interplay between culture, power and available narrative resources, on the one hand, and individual lives and struggles for voice and story'(Merrill and West, 2009, p. 39).

Although individual biographical narratives focus on particulars the individual is also rooted in a social context. Individual interviews can, as the work of the Chicago School of Sociology illustrates, be generalised to others in a similar situation. Biographies are also never fully individual as the stories told will often reveal shared experiences of lifelong learning, work, class, and gender, for example.

Biographical narrative story telling is a social process and is always socially constructed (Plummer, 2001). Biographies can also act as a resource for coping with changes and transitions in a person's life when living in uncertain times by drawing on past experiences which help them to redesign their life course through the process of 'biographicity' (Alheit, 1992). Biographical narratives are thus a creative, constructive and meaning making process.

While informed by the broader tradition of narrative biographies, the project used a more focused approach of concentrating upon the development of strategic career and biographies in line with work earlier undertaken at University of Warwick (see, e.g., Brown, 2004; 2012; Brown and Bimrose, 2011; 2012; Brown et al., 2007; 2012; Bimrose and Brown, 2010). The project was therefore conceived as an investigation into the strategic learning and career biographies of 125 individuals in Denmark, Germany, France, Spain and Italy through the use of 185 interviews (60 interviewees were to be interviewed twice). Contextualised strategic career and learning biographies were produced <sup>(1)</sup>, with the approach to data analysis expressly designed to make a contribution to discussion about policy and practice of career and labour market transitions.

Our research focused upon individuals' strategic learning and career biographies, with respondents recounting how their occupational identities

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<sup>(1)</sup> Strategic career and learning biographies highlight the most significant learning and transitions in an individual's career. The term should not be meant to imply that all individuals have taken a strategic view to how their careers should develop.

develop and change over time, and how they were impacted by transition processes associated with changes in work roles. The interviews drew upon a number of different elements of occupational identity development.

Narrative theories of identity emphasise how building a sense of ourselves which others may share relies in large part upon the narratives we construct. In developing and transforming occupational identities we prioritise certain episodes from our varied experiences and give these a special significance by incorporating them in our strategic career stories.

An additional benefit from using a methodology based upon interviewees' recounting their strategic career and learning biographies across the life-course came from highlighting how this research approach could be used as a possible career intervention tool, especially for those apparently settled in their career and who were unlikely to seek formal counselling support.

In strategic career and learning biographies the focus upon learning is more marked than in the traditional career or biographical narrative. This approach can bring out differences in learning processes, for example, drawing out the importance of: learning through challenging work; learning through interaction, including use of networks; mastering a substantive knowledge base, etc. (Brown et al., 2012). It also draws out the importance of aspects of the work itself and the context in which it takes place. The articulation of a strategic career and learning biography to the researcher also chimes with the value of the importance of the recognition and validation of a new narrative by others, especially during times of transition.

Asking about individuals' strategic career and learning biographies was both linked to, but also perhaps slightly different from, an individual's pre-existing repertoire of self-narratives. While some reflexive individuals had very clear stories which they had clearly told previously on a number of occasions to themselves and others, other respondents emphasised how this process was getting them to think about their career in new ways.

One final comment about the biographical research approach was that it was intended to exemplify the value of qualitative narrative analysis of individual strategic career and learning biographies as a useful tool for Cedefop to apply in analysis of policy and practice in work-related learning and development. The research team were therefore conscious that they needed to create a platform for further learning and development in the area of career transitions and learning, which incorporated a role for the use of narrative interviews to facilitate the development of individuals' strategic learning and career biographies.

The quality of the research was also ensured through adhering to ethical guidelines. Each partner secured ethical approval through their own institutional procedures as well as subscribing to the ethical guidelines of their disciplines.

Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity were given to all participants. All participants were given a pseudonym to avoid identification. Because of the nature of biographical interviews in some cases participants talked about sensitive personal issues and sometimes painful and emotional memories. In these cases the experiences were either generalised or else not reported at all. The research approaches and methods were at times sensitive to the needs of the participants.

## CHAPTER 2.

# The interviews

Biographies enable the voices of participants to be heard, placing them central to the research process as they reflect upon, interpret and give meaning to their life experiences within a social context. Importance was attached to building secure, collaborative relationships, to listening and working respectfully with participants (Stanley and Wise, 1993) as well as emphasising research itself as a form of learning. An integral part of the research process involved building and maintaining trust in the interviewee-researcher relationship, including responding to their requests for help, whereby the researchers acknowledged that the research process can, itself, be of benefit to research participants (Haverkamp, 2005). All interviewers were experienced as narrative biographers but four of the researchers were also trained as career guidance counsellors, thereby possessing a range of additional complementary interviewing skills. Indeed these researchers did, if it was appropriate, offer some support for individuals reflecting upon their career options after the formal research interview was completed. The first team meeting also included a seminar and discussion on biographical methods in relation to this research project. Lather (1986) argues that research can be judged for 'catalytic validity' according to 'the degree to which the research process re-orientates, focuses, energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it' (Lather, 1986, p. 272). By this criterion many of the interviews were very useful for participants in a number of respects.

That the researchers were skilled at building rapport, trust and exercising empathy is clear from the quality of the stories apparent from the rich interview transcripts. Interviewees clearly felt at ease and were in the main eager to tell their stories. The interviews also represented a social process where the subjectivity and inter-subjectivity of both the researched and the researcher formed part of the interview process as narratives were co-constructed and interpreted by both the interviewee and the interviewer. As Stanley and Wise point out 'all research involves, as its basis, interaction, a relationship, between researcher and researched [...] because the basis of all research is a relationship, this necessarily involves the presence of the researcher as a person. Personhood cannot be left behind, cannot be left out of the research process [...]. We see the presence of the researcher's self as central in all the research' (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p. 161).

While the focus of the interview is on understanding the individual learning experiences and career narratives which link past, present and possible future

career transitions and labour market experiences, the stories told also reveal collective experiences. For example, many interviewees talked about family and other experiences, and often recent family life impacts on aspects of their current career and learning attitudes and experiences (Merrill, 1999; Tett, 2000). Their public and private lives interact in daily life.

Typically each interview lasted between one to two hours. About half the sample, particularly those who were going through a transition at the time of the first interview, were interviewed a second time six or more months after the first interview. The intention was to get some in-depth data for identifying changes experienced in their working lives, especially during a career transition, over a period of time.

Informed consent was obtained and all participants were clear about the aims and objectives of the project as well as their role and rights. A common set of informed consent guidelines were produced. All participants were asked to give their consent for participation in the research process. The informed consent also made it clear that participants were able to leave the research process whenever they wanted. It was made clear that participation was voluntary especially as these were biographical interviews (and half the participants had a second interview) and these can be time-consuming. A copy of the interview transcript was made available to each participant as a means for further reflection and to involve them more closely in the research process as well as ensuring accuracy. They were also able to make any changes if they wished.

## 2.1. Research topic areas to be covered in interviews as a whole

Because the focus of the research was upon the interviewees' strategic career and learning biographies it was important that all interviewers had an idea of the range of issues which it might be useful to cover across the sample as a whole, rather than in each individual case. Seven topic areas were covered.

### **How did you develop the skills, knowledge and understanding required to do those jobs? Or similar type of question about the development of their skills, competencies and capabilities**

Knowledge base: knowledge acquired through education and training; acculturation; experience, social interaction; reflection; practice with feedback; episodes, impressions and images that provide the foundation for informal knowledge; work process knowledge; learning to apply knowledge in different and/or more challenging contexts.

Also learning and development associated with improving task performance; role performance; situational or contextual awareness and understanding; teamwork; personal and/or group development; decision making and problem solving; judgement.

Alternative ways of encouraging interviewees to talk about their learning and development is through a conversation about their work activities and how they developed their capabilities underlining their work performance through, for example: challenging work; participation in work practices; integration in the work contexts; relationships with others (members of working groups, managers, peers, subordinates, clients; supporting the learning of others (sensing others' development needs); empathy; perception of risks and opportunities regarding job-keeping and job-changing; flexibility/adaptability to changing situations; self-understanding; emotional balance; conflict resolution.

Interviewers needed to recognised that the depths of description and interpretation of work experiences (compare highly skilled associate professional with a technical writer working largely alone who is doing a series of very similar tasks) would differ as well as individuals reflexivity and whether they perceive themselves in terms of possession of a skill set which could be applied in a variety of different contexts.

### **Significant work and learning transitions**

Based on the conversations regarding the topics above it is likely that significant learning and development transitions have been mentioned: learning as an apprentice, trainee, becoming an experienced skilled worker, role of continuing vocational training (CVT); higher education; adult education; trade Union supported learning, etc., but also learning and development from changing jobs, value of guidance and support, etc. Questions were used to elicit narrative and meaning rather than just description:

- What changes and transitions have you experienced in the past related to work (e.g. promotion, redundancy, voluntary severance, re-entry after a period of absence) and when did they occur (e.g. age/year)?
- What have been the most, and the least, satisfying aspects of your previous work experiences?
- Which was the most significant and why?
- How did the change or transition come about and what was the impact on you?

### **Significant learning experiences**

Participants talked about significant learning experiences of value to them in making career and labour market transitions in answer to other themes, so here you may draw out more, if necessary:

- What changes and transitions have you experienced in the past related to learning? (e.g. formal courses; informal learning; on-the-job training; continuing professional development) and at what age did they occur?
- What have been the most, and the least, satisfying aspects of your previous learning experiences?
- Which was the most significant and why?
- How did the change or transition come about and what was the impact on you?

Researchers could ask more about the learning experience itself:

- Did you enjoy it? What were the highs and lows of learning?
- role and support of others (tutor; mentor; trainer; peers; employer, etc.) in learning;
- Would you return to some form of learning in the future?
- Impact of learning on self, work, family, etc.

If participants mainly addressed formal learning, interviewers might ask about other forms of learning – how significant was learning while you were working? For example, through tackling challenging tasks and roles; participation in group processes; working alongside others; working with clients; problem solving; trying things out, etc.

If interviewees only focus on one dimension of learning, for example, cognitive or practical, they could be asked about other forms of learning (relational; emotional; social; becoming reflexive; supporting learning of others; adaptability).

### **The nature of support**

By this stage of the interview this theme is likely to have been partially covered, but here are some possible questions to ask at that stage:

For your most significant work and/or learning transition(s):

- What support (if any) did you seek from others?
- Coaching; mentoring; guidance, etc.; from whom?
- What support would you have liked to receive that you did not?
- Who, or what else did you need to consider in this change and transition process?
- What were key issues arising for you during that change or transition (these may have been practical, like finance, caring responsibilities,

- accommodation, family commitments or emotional, like regret, excitement, anticipation, disappointment, etc.)?
- What were you hoping for as an outcome of this change or transition?
  - When did you first realise that you were likely to experience a change or transition in your work and learning pathway?
  - What did you do once you realised a change or transition was likely (and when)?
  - Once you realised a change or transition was likely, what did you need to know before you could make the change or transition? How did you go about finding out?
  - What was the first thing you did to cope or adapt to the change or transition?

### **Future development**

These next three areas could go in a number of directions as the interviewee's narrative develops, but here are some possible questions to consider:

- What options have you considered for your future (e.g., promotion; another job; change of career; more learning or training; reducing time spent in paid employment, etc.)?
- What do you think your next change or transition related to working or learning is likely to be (e.g. looking for a new job; actively pursuing a promotion in the workplace; leaving your present employer; working for yourself; upskilling; reskilling)?

### **Learning from previous changes and transitions and moving forward**

Across all work and learning experiences, which have been most significant (e.g., particular roles, like supervisor or mentor; making your own decisions; helping people; making money; flexibility; working as part of a team, learning something new)?

Can you see any patterns in how you coped with/managed your previous work and learning changes and transitions?

How might you approach future change or transition (strategies, approaches, etc.?)

How would you advise someone else experiencing (or about to experience) a work and learning change or transitions?

### **Any further influences**

Looking back on your careers changes and transitions to date, are there any important influences on the directions you have taken that we have not touched on in the interview (e.g., culture or faith)?

## 2.2. Framing of the interviews

The common interview themes outlined above were identified to form a guideline for the areas to be covered in the interviews as a whole. Insofar as particular questions were offered these are what we would like to answers in the research – they did not have to be asked directly of the interviewees. Ideally the issues arose naturally as part of the interviewees' narratives about their strategic learning and career biographies. Note also national contexts differed so there were also some questions which were country specific. The common interview frame and, in particular, the seven themes acted as a guide for the data analysis.

### 2.2.1. Initial framing of the interview

A guideline for the initial framing of the interview was agreed with country teams as follows: 'thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. We are interested in finding out more about the work and learning pathways that you have experienced in your adult life. By understanding more about work and learning pathways and the ways in which adults deal with, and adapt to, change and transition in those pathways, we're hoping that we will be able to provide constructive suggestions to policy-makers about the type of support that could help adults in their transitions.'

Questions were to be framed so as to encourage narration, for example, following a broad introduction as above, asking 'tell me about your most important transitions' could elicit ways into the topic areas which we may have not considered. Some interviewers preferred to start with details of personal background, whereas for others this may emerge in the course of talking about their transitions. The intention behind interviews designed to elicit the strategic career and learning biographies was to get 'stories' about transitions which the interviewee is happy with and which can clearly be linked to policy concerns as to how to support individuals making career and labour market transitions.

One approach could involve the interviewer asking the interviewee to tell me about:

- your present work and learning situation;
- previous work and learning changes and transitions that you have experienced;
- changes and transitions that you anticipate in the near future.

## CHAPTER 3.

# Sampling

The sample was drawn so as to represent as many different possible types of career and learning pathways with which many people in their mid-career and with middle level qualifications in each country will engage. The intention was also to recruit men and women in roughly equal numbers, identifying people in small, medium and large companies in both the private and public sectors who are in a range of work positions but not management. The sample will also be drawn from both urban and rural areas. The labour market areas chosen by each partner will reflect the different nature of the labour markets, patterns of work organisation and career and learning pathways across the five countries and the knowledge they have of their national labour markets.

Five countries participated in the study: Denmark Germany, Spain, France, and Italy. Each country partner identified a sample of about 25 people mainly aged between 35 and 45 for biographical interviewing. Each participant had a first interview, mainly from February to August 2012. About 60 participants were interviewed again, mainly from October 2012 to February 2013. The first interview enabled participants to reflect upon their learning experiences, recent career transition and aspirations for the future. The second interview allowed participants to identify the changes (or not) that learning and a career transition has had on the self, working life and private life. It also gave the researchers the opportunities to fill any gaps in coverage of the seven research themes and, in particular, cover issues concerned with their learning and development about which the researchers felt it would be useful to have more information. Hence topics raised in the first interview could be followed up to gain a more in-depth understanding or for clarification of any issues. It also helped with the triangulation of the data.

The reason for re-interviewing only 60 participants was to acknowledge that some people may not wish to participate in a second interview, their circumstances may have changed which means it would be difficult to arrange a second interview (e.g. they may have left their employment and moved to another part of the country or for other reasons). Also the timescale for the second interviews was tighter than for the first, so 12 re-interviews per country was a realistic and achievable target.

It was intended that the sample should include people who had undergone the following types of career transitions:

- those who have followed pathways and transitions which are broadly linear and typical for people starting in certain occupations in that particular society;
- those who have engaged in substantive up-skilling after the age of 25 (including some who have used substantive CVT and others who have principally learned while working but with some complementary use of some formal learning);
- those who have undertaken substantive reskilling either prior to or following a change of sector;
- those with several career changes and which includes more than four career transitions (possibly between roles in an organisation as well as those involving changes of employer, sector and possibly employment status).

Since the purpose of the study was to contribute towards an integrated model of how learning can support labour market transitions, Cedefop requested that the sample to be recruited should be as representative as possible of the main part of the active population. Therefore, special interest groups, groups at risk or with special needs that usually require specific attention as for example, the young, the long-term unemployed and migrants, were not part of the analysis. Individuals to be recruited for the interviews were mainly between 35 and 45 years of age, had work experience and had experienced various labour market transitions, and were not usually in management positions (although progression, as result of positive attitude to learning and subsequent promotion in the lowest ranks of management might be included) and without a postgraduate degree. They should have finished at least upper-secondary school, however. The sample drew on people who had followed different routes within upper-secondary school, for example academic, technical and vocational streams and represented a similar mix of post-school qualification levels (up to and including bachelor degree level). The interviewees in the main had the nationality of the country in which they lived, because links back to the main cultural patterns of education and training were important. The sample also included some interviewees who had had formal career guidance support.

### 3.1. Specification of the sample

The overall intention is that a group of interviewees in each country should reflect a number of different pathways by which workers in their mid-career reach the position of performing middle-range jobs in the labour market. This has been achieved in practice with sufficient variation within and between samples to reflect a very broad range of ways in which learning and development support

individuals' labour market transitions. Because of the considerable debate before finalisation of this issue in the inception report about who is and is not in the sample it was proposed that there should be overarching criterion – the suggestion is that every individual in the sample should be performing or have performed middle-range jobs for at least five years but not necessarily continuously (typically ISCO 3-Technicians and associate professionals; ISCO 4-Clerical support workers; ISCO 5-Service and sales workers; ISCO 6-Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers; ISCO 7-Craft and related trades workers). Those who move into or out of ISCO 1-managerial; ISCO 2-professional; ISCO 8-Plant and machine operators, and assemblers; ISCO 9-Elementary occupations and ISCO 0-Armed forces occupations jobs are not automatically excluded provided most of their working life has been spent in middle-range jobs).

The argument for five years is that each person needs to have reached 'experienced worker' status so as to be able to reflect upon their experience of at least one complete skill formation process as a whole. This criterion worked very well and in those cases where individuals moved into management, performed low level jobs or were unemployed they still had experience performing a core of middle-range work which required some substantive skill development. The flexibility over who to include was particularly necessary as we also wanted individuals to have experience of at least one major career change – thus ruling out someone who trained, for example as an electrician, and worked for the same employer.

Similarly the focus on the sample as a whole worked well, allowing in particular some purposive choices of individuals with, for example, an aspirational career decision making style because although they performed mid-range work their career focus lay elsewhere, for example their driving interest may have been artistic. The final specification was that in each country the sample as a whole should have the following characteristics, they should mainly:

- be aged 35-45;
- reflect a range of different career and learning pathways, including having achieved a range of different upper secondary qualifications;
- have at least 11 of each gender;
- reflect variation in geographical contexts: some interviewees to have spent at least part of their lives away from major cities;
- reflect variation in organisational contexts: public/private; small/medium/large;
- reflect variation in types of training and when training was undertaken;
- reflect variation in types of learning: informal, non-formal and formal;
- reflect variation in types of guidance and other support;

- reflect variation in transition regimes;
- reflect variation in work contexts, including opportunities for challenging work, interactions with others, etc.;
- reflect variation in their occupational identities and the extent to which they had a clear occupational identity at all; may also have a strong organisational attachment or consider they possess a skill set which can be applied in a number of employment contexts;
- reflect a mix of employment statuses: full-time; part-time; self-employed; temporary work; under-employed; seasonal work;
- reflect variety in how much time individuals spend in employment compared to being engaged in other activities: unemployed, studying, exercising care responsibilities, other, etc., over their life-course to date;
- reflect variation in the number of major career and labour market transitions interviewees have experienced (where interviewees have experienced multiple transitions probably best to focus on just those they see as the most important – probably not more than five).

Further the individuals in the sample should:

- have spent at least 10 years in the education and training system in one or more of the five countries;
- have spent at least five years working in one or more of the five countries;
- have completed upper secondary education;
- usually have completed some substantive post-school education and training (initial vocational education and training; continuing vocational training; apprenticeship; degree or short-cycle higher education study; adult education; work-based training, etc., but not have undertaken full-time masters; doctoral or professional training leading to high level qualifications comparable to European qualification framework (EQF) levels 7 and 8);
- have performed relatively challenging work for at least one year in a single occupational or organisational context so that they can reflect upon acquisition and development of work process knowledge in that context;
- reflect variation in their values, personal agency, adaptability, career transitioning styles, reflexivity and resilience.

In the final samples we did have sufficient variation within and across countries to be able to cover more or less any issue which we may have wanted to investigate further in the data analysis. Perhaps the only initial criterion which we had to amend was 'not have undertaken full-time masters; doctoral or professional training leading to high level qualifications comparable to EQF levels 7 and 8).' Certainly we did not include anyone who completed a full-time master's degree immediately or very soon after leaving school. However, where someone

spent say five years in mid-level work and then returned to full-time study to complete masters or professional training leading to high level qualifications comparable to EQF level 7 then this seemed to represent an important transition pathway for those performing mid-range work and they have been included in the sample.

## CHAPTER 4.

# Data analysis

The data analysis was dialogical, iterative and an interdisciplinary process. The transcripts were read and re-read and key themes were identified. The analysis process was discussed and agreed at team meetings where partners shared case studies and their interpretations of some representative transcripts. Sensitising concepts were identified to help frame the analysis and develop the conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Themes were identified at the first team meeting for focusing the content of the research interview. However, as the labour market contexts vary by country some themes and questions will be country specific.

The sharing of transcripts between the researchers and with the participants helped minimise interviewer bias yet at the same time we do recognise the role of the subjectivity of the researcher and the researched in biographical narrative research. Triangulation and corroboration was ensured by comparing the findings with the literature review although such in-depth biographical narratives did also result in new findings. The findings were also compared with previous similar studies undertaken by members of the research team.

Transcripts were read and interpreted by more than one researcher to also facilitate investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1989). Corroboration between the research team and the researched was an important aspect of this study. Participants had the opportunity to check their transcripts for accuracy and validity and evaluate the data. The second interviews also provided an opportunity for participants to clarify their views and further develop their stories.

Research collaboration was achieved through the interdisciplinary research team working closely together. This process was achieved through regular team meetings, email contact and skype. Biographical narrative interviewing is a meaning making process. Throughout the study the interview data was continually reflected upon, revisited and read to assess the interpretation process by each partner country and by members of the central research team. Team workshops were held at which all researchers had the opportunity to discuss the evolving findings. Bilateral exchanges with the central team took place in relation to the country reports.

Because of the volume of data that each national team generated it was decided that each country team could decide about the balance between reporting at the level of the individual cases and drawing findings from across the cases. Similarly, some teams analysed all their cases in some detail, whereas

others concentrated more in telling fewer cases in more depth. It was felt appropriate to adopt this complementary approach as it was not known in advance which method would be more useful.

#### 4.1. Data preparation for analysis

One particular challenge was that the interviews were conducted in Spanish, Danish, German, French and Italian but the overall data analysis was conducted in English. Data was therefore produced at three levels: thumbnail sketches in English; (10 page) transcripts in Spanish Danish, German, French, and Italian; (four page) summaries in English.

##### 4.1.1. Thumbnail sketches of career biographies of all participants

The intention was that everyone in the sample was performing or had performed middle-range jobs for at least five years (although not necessarily continuously). The interviews were conducted in Spanish Danish, German, French and Italian. So the first task was to develop summary information (thumbnail sketches) of the sample as a whole in English.

Presentation of information to construct career biography thumbnail sketches:

- current occupation: also whether stable or unstable employment; self-employed, etc.;
- age range: (younger mid-career) 39 or below; or (older mid-career) 40 or over;
- gender: marital and/or relationship status, dependants: if integral to the narrative (switched jobs to follow a partner; support of a partner) could include; but if not brought up in the narrative then cannot see why we should ask. There could be a similar treatment of ethnicity health, disability and other personal characteristics. Many of the personal details were subsequently removed (to protect anonymity);
- geographical mobility: suitably generalised to preserve anonymity;
- education and training paths: details on upper secondary; initial VET; higher education; CVT; adult education; etc.;
- significant jobs/positions which have been held: other positions could be aggregated: series of temporary jobs, etc.;
- reasons for relevant transitions: e.g. redundancy; time to move on; search for new experiences, etc.).

The above was then assembled into a career biography thumbnail sketch or more formal timeline: some respondents also provided a simple profile drawn

from a CV. The first set of sixty thumbnail sketches from the five countries then enabled the central team to have an overview of how the sample as a whole was evolving and have detailed discussions with national teams both about prospective data analysis and the balance of the national samples in a number of respects.

#### **4.1.2. (Ten page) transcripts of all interviews**

Issues associated with the cost and volume of data meant it was decided not to produce full written transcripts of all 180 interviews. To do so would have meant there would have been over 3 000 pages of transcripts in five languages. Hence it was decided that the written transcripts should normally be about 10 pages in length. The written transcripts were produced in the five languages with one exception. Seven of the French interview transcripts were produced in English. This was because the researcher transcribed the interviews himself and translated as he produced the transcript to make it easier to perform the next stage: the production of four page summaries in English.

The national language transcripts were the basis of the initial data analysis by the national teams at both the individual and national level. This process also influenced the production of the English summaries as choices had to be made about the most significant data and what illustrative quotes to use. Further, the national teams chose some 'iconic cases' to represent particular themes and put these forward as cases to be emphasised in the final analysis.

#### **4.1.3. (Four page) summaries in English of career biographies of all participants**

Again there were issues of cost and volume of data if the full written transcripts were translated into English. Hence the decision was made to produce summaries in English of approximately four pages in length. Further national teams were asked to ensure that the summaries adequately covered the seven themes which were used to inform the data collection. These themes covered how the interviewees developed the skills, knowledge and understanding required to do their jobs; significant work and learning transitions; significant learning experiences; the nature of any support they received for their learning and development; any plans for future career development; what they learned from coping with previous transitions; and any further influences on their career direction.

The iterative dialogical process of the co-construction of the (guideline was four pages, but some summaries are longer) contextualised English summaries, with access to the fuller transcripts in the original language, meant the project team as a whole could offer breadth and depth in the coverage of all the issues

initially identified as being important for the project to cover. The English summaries sought to achieve the following:

- reflect the views of the interviewees on the processes of career and labour market transitions, including through the use of quotes (some quite short – key phrases or sentences – but in other cases slightly longer key passages have been translated);
- represent individuals' strategic career and learning biographies in a way whereby together they help answer the question of how learning and development can help individuals make successful transitions in the labour market and illustrate the multiple dimensions underlying individual approaches to career transitions and learning;
- link the interviewees' stories to the context, structures and policies in which they are embedded, including pointing to relevant supporting literature and possible policy recommendations;
- exemplify the value of qualitative narrative analysis of individual strategic career and learning biographies as a useful tool for Cedefop to apply in policy relevant research;
- be used as a basis for discussions with central team on data analysis and sample construction.

#### 4.2. Data analysis: how the analysis is layered

The analysis cut the data in three ways: by country framing of the context; interview themes within each country; and aggregated comparative commentary on education, training and guidance pathways within and across countries.

Each country team has produced country contextual information and their analysis of their country data on the basis of the interview themes. Alongside the results of the data analysis provided in the main report, below are given some themes from earlier European studies which were circulated to inform the data analysis. The following themes emerged from previous European studies and national teams were alerted to make a note of these in their initial contextualised summaries if they emerged in the initial analyses:

- complementary role played by vocational training and learning at work, with breadth and depth of forms of learning and development relevant to work;
- the importance of episodes of substantive learning and development across the life-course: CVT and learning while working were both often significant and the career biographies showed individuals had episodes of substantive learning and development which often transformed their prospects, while they were also learning more incrementally through challenging work.

- Overall, rather than engaging in continuous learning at an even pace every year, people are likely to have periods of more and less intensive learning;
- the importance of personal agency: rich range of learning activities participated in the last five years included both formal education and training activities, with learning through challenging work, networks, from others, experience and self-directed learning also figuring prominently. Interestingly, the reasons they took part in training and learning activities were primarily related to skill development and personal development;
  - negotiating careers within different opportunity structures: the pathways available and different sets of expectations about career choice and occupational mobility are framed within clear opportunity structures which vary within and between sectors and countries;
  - job mobility, reskilling and the importance of career guidance to lifelong learning: the importance of job mobility for individuals in a range of contexts in order to support up-skilling, re-skilling, employability and the integration of workers for longer in the labour market and how individuals valued support in making career decisions. This support could take various forms, but from a policy perspective access to advice and guidance services for adults at times of transition could play a crucial role in facilitating positive outcomes for the individual and the smooth functioning of the labour market.

At national level and in the sample as a whole it was clear that we had sufficient variation within and across countries to be able to cover more or less any issue which we may want to investigate further in the data analysis. In particular the sample:

- reflects variation in geographical contexts: some interviewees to have spent at least part of their lives away from major cities;
- reflects variation in organisational contexts: public/private; small/medium/large;
- reflects variation in types of training and when training was undertaken;
- reflects variation in types of learning: informal, non-formal and formal;
- reflects variation in types of guidance and other support;
- reflects variation in transition regimes;
- reflects variation in work contexts, including opportunities for challenging work, interactions with others, etc.;
- reflects variation in their occupational identities and the extent to which they had a clear occupational identity at all; may also have a strong organisational attachment or consider they possess a skill set which can be applied in a number of employment contexts;

- reflects a mix of employment statuses: full-time; part-time; self-employed; temporary work; under-employed; seasonal work;
- reflects variety in how much time individuals spend in employment compared to being engaged in other activities: unemployed, studying, exercising care responsibilities, other, etc., over their life-course to date;
- reflects variation in the number of major career and labour market transitions interviewees have experienced.

The individuals in the sample also nearly always meet the following criteria in that they:

- have spent at least 10 years in the education and training system in one or more of the five countries;
- have spent at least five years working in one or more of the five countries;
- have completed upper secondary education;
- usually have completed some substantive post-school education and training (IVET; CVT; apprenticeship; degree or short-cycle higher education study; adult education; work-based training, etc., but not have undertaken full-time post-graduate study after initial graduation: masters; doctoral or professional training leading to high level qualifications comparable to EQF levels 7 and 8);
- have performed relatively challenging work for at least one year in a single occupational or organisational context so that they can reflect upon acquisition and development of work process knowledge in that context;
- reflect variation in their values, personal agency, adaptability, career transitioning styles, reflexivity and resilience.

## CHAPTER 5.

# Issues of validity, generalisability, and reliability

The concept and meaning of validity is used differently by those using quantitative approaches to those using more subjective qualitative methods such as biographical approaches. As a consequence the criteria which are used for assessing the validity of research differ. Critiques of the biographical method argue that such research is not valid, particularly as it focuses on one or a small number of case studies using subjective approaches. Conventional researchers relate validity to statistical significance, standardisation, reliability and generalizability. For Plummer 'validity is primarily concerned with making sure that the technique is actually studying what it is supposed to' (Plummer, 2001, p. 154). The language and assumptions used in relation to validity and biographical research are different. Researchers may work from a sociological or psychological perspective which will generate different data but this does not make the story less valid. Validity lies in generating rich, thick narrative data, 'to the quality of our knowing and its power to speak to others in new ways' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 164). Biographical research is relational so that 'what matters is the quality of the research relationship, and the extent to which this facilitates deeper forms of insight and wider meaning'. (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 164). As Plummer argues 'the closer I am to the phenomenon I want to understand, the nearer I am to validity [...]. If the subjective story is what the researcher is after, the life history approach becomes the most valid method [...]. It simply will not do to classify, catalogue and standardise everything in advance, for this would be a distorted and hence invalid story' (Plummer, 2001, p. 155).

For Atkinson validity of a story refers to whether it is trustworthy rather than accuracy: 'internal consistency is a primary quality check that can be used by both the interviewer and the storyteller to square or clarify early comments with recent insights, if they appear to be different' (Atkinson, 1998, p. 60).

What is being argued here by Atkinson (1998) and by Clough et al. (2004) is the case for authenticity rather than validity. Giving a copy of the transcript to the storyteller/author is used by many biographical researchers, not only as a means of involving the interviewee in the research process but also as a means of allowing them to check their story.

Reliability is about method, consistency and replicability so that if the same study was undertaken by another researcher similar results would be found.

Biographical research focuses on the individual and case studies. The Chicago School of Sociology used individual life stories to understand the lives and social context of immigrants, criminals and delinquents, for example the work of Thomas and Znaniecki, Shaw, Becker, Matza. One biography can provide great insight into social life: 'we need, always, to keep in mind the rich individual biography or good story' (Merrill and West, 2009, p. 164). An individual life story is always rooted in a social context and macro structures (Wright Mills, 1970; Bertaux, 1981). As Rustin (2000) asserts the validity of individual cases rests in their capacity to generate understanding of how people make their worlds in interaction with others, in diverse ways. Hollway and Jefferson stress that research can be generalisable but still flawed: 'one person's unique defensive structures cannot simply be read off from their social, demographic characteristics' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 127). In telling a story a person is drawing on their memory and also telling aspects of their life which is important to them at that particular moment in time. For Thompson 'it is not only what people say and whether it was true, but how they remember it that matters' (Thompson, 2004, p. 83).

In undertaking biographical interviews, for example in looking at the experiences of adult students in higher education, a saturation point is often reached whereby the interviewees are talking about the same issues. An individual story becomes a collective one. The idea of the collective voice in biographical research was taken up and embraced by feminists as a biographical story illuminates the relationship between the personal and the political. Life histories thus highlight collective issues such as class, gender and ethnicity as 'in constructing a biography a person relates to significant others and social contexts: a biography, therefore, is never fully individualistic' (Merrill, 2007, p. 71).

Many biographical researchers argue that validity, reliability and representativeness as used by quantitative researchers are not appropriate in this type of research (Denzin, 1997; Atkinson, 1998; Plummer, 2001). For Plummer the focus is instead on establishing a humanistic approach and language to research: '[...] a view which takes the human being as an embodied, emotional, interactive self, striving for meaning in wider historically specific social worlds and an even wider universe, is not a bad, even humbling, starting place for the 'human sciences'. And that to listen attentively to the stories people tell of their lives is, equally, not a bad starting point for 'human research' (Plummer, 2001, p. 255-256).

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