

What My Mother Knew: A Study of Conflicting Narratives, Personal Identity and a Sense of Self

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Abstract

The article explores a personal narrative that a mother has told her daughter. The content is informed by an auto/biographical approach (Merrill and West, 2009) and it explores conflicting narratives from a daughter's perspective, as she considers the narrative passed down by her mother alongside records recently researched and obtained. The findings result in a discussion of self-development in the early stages of life, in middle and old age, and the importance of creativity and playing in the process of development. The argument highlights the subject's need for a personal narrative, and, particularly in later life, one that includes a genealogy. To inform the exploration I use the psychoanalytical theory of Winnicott (1980, 1990), and Jung (1935) to explore self-development; and Erikson (1959) to inform middle and older age. In addition, the narrative theory of Ricoeur (1979, 1992) and emplotment are drawn on to offer an interpretation of the mother's biography and some understanding of the complexity of her relationship with her daughter.

Keywords: auto/biography, narrative, object relating, "playing", self, true/false selves, fiction, "emplotment"

Introduction

This article explores the importance of narrative in understanding the self, identity and one's place in the world at pivotal moments, particularly in childhood, middle and old age. It sees the development of self as a dynamic, life-long process in which creativity, imagination and playfulness play a crucial part.

The substance of this article arose as a result of a study between women and their parents as part of other researchⁱ. The original project followed an auto/biographical methodology that is extended here, and which has been detailed by Clough (2002), Andrews, Squire and

Tambloukou (2008), Merrill & West (2009), and Goodson, Biesta, Gert, Tedder & Adair, (2010).

An auto/biographical methodology

By an auto/biographical approach I understand that it is one that essentially draws attention to “the construction of our own lives through autobiography and the construction of the others’ lives through biography” (Merrill and West 2009: 5). It has become a source of rich research material over the last twenty five years (Steedman 1986, Stanley 1992, West 1996, Miller 2007, Chapman Hault, 2009) and emphasises the interrelationship between the lives of the researcher and that of the subject studied, and the resonances in the lives of both. This relationship is interrogated and, therefore, does not seek or pretend objectivity in making sense of peoples’ lives, rather it acknowledges the place of the researcher in the research, and assumes reflexivityⁱⁱ on the part of the researcher. To borrow a psychoanalytical term, this methodology aims for distance, a psychological detachment found at the heart of psychoanalytical theory. Auto/biography involves an immersion in the lives of others while, paradoxically, requiring the ability to cultivate distance.

I realised that in my earlier research I had veered too much towards detachment when analysing my relationship with my mother, with the result that I had marginalised her. I think that while I interrogated my own sense of self development and identity I had not given enough consideration to my mother’s. Quite possibly it was because, at least sub-consciously, I was aware of an intense underlying sense of abandonment and pain in both my mother’s narrative and my own, which might overwhelm the narratives of others. I have to add that I never felt the emotional connection that results from good object relating with the mother/prime carer (Winnicott, 1980) (see below). There was also a practical reason for sidelining my mother’s biography, since my parents had separated and then divorced, and my contact with her was limited after the age of eight. It was only more recently that I have been able to discover more factual details of my mother’s biography, prior to this I had only her version of the narrative, which emerges as an amalgamation of fact and fantasy.

These causal reasons go some way to explain why our relationship was troubled and why an understanding of motherhood, identity, selfhood and a sense of lineage were difficult for my

mother. She had few facts; she knew that she was born in what was then Ceylon, although the correct date of her birth, 1921, remained unconfirmed until three years ago, nearly 30 years after she died - even her death certificate is inaccurate by seven years. She had never possessed a birth certificate and incorrectly assumed that she was illegitimate. Her father remained in Ceylon, her only tangible memory of this time is a single sepia photograph of him.



Richard Harrison – my maternal grandfather

She was brought to England by her mother and taken to her wealthy paternal grandfather who refused to take them in; she and her sister, aged three and eighteen months respectively, were taken by her mother and left in an orphanage, with a payment from the grandfather.¹ She spent her childhood in the home, had life-threatening heart surgery when she was 17, and while in hospital her mother visited her, the only other occasion they met after my mother was three. I began to think about her childhood experiences and self-development and the relationship it might have with what I consider to be my lack of a mother/daughter connection with her.

To inform my discussion I mainly draw on the psychoanalytical theory of Winnicott, Jung and Erickson, and the narrative theory of Ricoeur.

In an attempt to locate my lack of cathexes with my mother and to understand her a little better I carried out some research at the National Children's Home, and National Archives of Births, Marriages and Death. I considered the findings in conjunction with the stories she had told me about herself through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. My reading of Winnicott (1980, 1986) persuades me that my mother lacked a secure sense of self developed in the earliest relationship with the mother.

Winnicott self-development and “playing”

Extending Freud's theorising, Winnicott's work, first published in 1971, focuses more on the developing ego and less on the instincts and drives of the id. He highlights the importance of the relationship with the mother/primary carer where the earliest object relations and experiences centre on the mother rather than on the father. Until s/he is able to distinguish self from other Winnicott (1980) argues that the infant perceives the mother (the breast) as an extension of her/himself. For Winnicott a good mother is one who is adaptive enough to an infant's early needs, limiting her (the breast's) absence only as long as the baby can tolerate it. It is only gradually that the adaptive mother allows the baby reduced control and, in the process, the infant perceives the breast, essentially, as an object, outside itself. Thus, object relating begins. An infant, then, comes to perceive the mother/breast as an object, not within its control; and with this understanding comes the infant's introduction to frustration and attendant aggression, which together with the inevitable resulting tensions, it must learn to tolerate in infancy, and throughout life.

Integral to the process of self development is what Winnicott terms “playing”, he insists on the participle to distinguish it from than the noun “play”, which he considers can be reductive. Winnicott's playing includes: reality-testing, and the use of transitional spaces; it prioritises creativity and imagination in the search and development of a (true) self; it includes the location of the cultural experience and the importance of environmental factors. “Playing”, as Winnicott uses the term, is a process that involves relinquishing conscious selfhood and moves towards the realms of the imagination. Winnicott reminds us that playing and self-development lasts a lifetime and he claims that, “Whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well” (1980: 46). Winnicott claims that “reality-acceptance is never accepted, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality” (1980: 15). It is safe transitional spaces, and transitional objects which help the self negotiate tensions throughout life and promote ontological development. I am convinced that creative activities producing literature, poetry, art, film, etc. can be considered as these objects and contribute to this process of self development. My mother and I both discovered that engaging in the creative arts can help make sense of the world and our place in it.

When I consider my mother's biography I find that psychoanalytical theorising helps me understand not only her but also myself. She was entered into a children's home in England at the age of three after leaving her father behind in Ceylon. Consequently, she lacked the parental dyad and the transitional space that can be available for the child between two adults that may engender a safe space to play and test reality (Cartlidge, 2012). It is difficult to imagine the intensity of pain and grief she must have experienced as an outcome of abandonment. The result, from the perspective of my relationship with her, is that she always seemed so changeable to me when I was young, I never felt secure in her behaviour towards me, she was ambitious and promoted me, and then she would neglect me. In the language of Winnicott, she was not adaptive, she had not experienced good object relating in her early life and she suffered separation anxiety. In simpler terms, it could be argued that my mother's circumstances and experiences in the orphanage meant that she lacked a role model for mothering. Her behaviour caused me great pain and left me vulnerable, resonating with the feelings she must have also experienced as a child.

In addition to successful object relating in our earliest relationships, self-development is also influenced by what Winnicott (1980: 116) identifies as cultural circumstances, and what he calls "inherited tradition". Winnicott describes the "cultural experience as an extension of the idea of transitional phenomena and of play" (ibid.).

I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individual and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw *if we have somewhere to put what we find* (p.116) [italics Winnicott's].

The stress contained in the italics forms one of the most persuasive arguments for me of using Winnicott's theory. I consider he suggests a link between recording lives within a tradition of storytelling, including myths, oral tradition and other forms of literature and art. He also questions the notion of historical objectivity and an "objective" account that I also query. His concept of a true self (see below) and our individual experiences suggest we all bring something to writing up a narrative or historical account; it is part of a relationship and our interaction with others. To attempt to discuss people purely objectively simply creates insubstantial ghosts, unconvincing as human beings. Winnicott, for me, establishes the "interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as a basis for inventiveness" (p.117) and adds validity to my use of fiction in exploring experience. He highlights a need

for a safe transitional space and transitional phenomena that creative acts including story-telling may provide. We construct our lives and find meaning through creativity and narration; and if there are ellipses we fill them in.

True and false selves

The narratives we tell help us to develop a true self. It is necessary to establish what is meant when Winnicott uses the term “true self”. Winnicott develops his concept of true and false selves during several papers (1950-1971) and the meaning is fluid, he refers to a “true” self, “core” self and a “central” self, implying similar meanings. However, I think the terms are used without suggesting an essentialist core, because for Winnicott the self is always experiencing and developing, and, therefore, “true” or “central” self are more helpful terms. I follow Caldwell and Joyce’s definition, but prefer to use the term “true”.

The central [true] self could be said to be the inherited potential which is experiencing a continuity of being, and acquiring in its own way and at its own speed a personal psychic reality and a personal body scheme.

(Caldwell & Joyce 2011: 160)

For Winnicott only the true self can be creative and only the true self can feel real (1960 cited in Caldwell and Joyce, 2011), it is important to remember, too, that the true self, for Winnicott, starts in infancy with the baby’s earliest relationship with the mother. It is at this time that an inner confidence and stability are developed which are necessary later to sustain the self when societal pressures and negative experiences impinge. If this process is impeded, Winnicott acknowledges that the true self can be traumatized and false self[ves] adopted.

Winnicott, my mother and me

I find it possible to apply Winnicott’s theories to my mother’s experiences and in my mother’s relationship with me. Her inconsistency in her interaction with me was a repeated pattern that was confusing for me as young child, and such a reaction has the potential to induce, and, indeed, re-produce the instability within the mother in her offspring. The self is fragile as Mollon (1993) reminds us, and it responds defensively, as Klein (1975) tells us during early object relating and reality testing. I felt abandoned and insecure with my mother,

as she must have felt in her own childhood. Our rejection of each other was a two-way process. Winnicott, as I have indicated, argues that playing is an essential part of the process of reality testing, and goes on for a life time, it is a process that is both creative and imaginative, but it demands safe transitional spaces to occur. At various stages in our development both my mother and I lacked safe spaces for playful reality testing; we both experienced separation from and rejection by parents. It can be seen that “playing” with Winnicott’s interpretation in mind and used with his definition in the context of this paper, is not a reductive or derogatory term as sometimes is the case when the word is used in everyday language.

Ricoeur and emplotment

My mother’s biography consists of a range of narratives, some fact and some fiction. In an attempt to understand how they are interwoven, I turned to Ricoeur. In an understanding of what Ricoeur (1979) identifies as “emplotment” in “The Human Experience of Time and Narrative”, fact and fiction are linked. In Section II (*ibid.*) Ricoeur argues for the central position of plot in structuring all narratives, whether fact or fiction. He considers plot together with temporal aspects as fundamental to the interpretation of both historical and fictional narratives. Furthermore, he sees the “function of narrative as *shaping* our temporal experience” (*ibid.* italics Ricoeur’s). He claims that in both fictional and “real” narratives temporal experiences are contained within most concepts of plot. This is the process Ricoeur terms “emplotment”. In Ricoeur’s work I also perceive a link to psychoanalytic perspectives in the interplay of time, past and present, and the impact past experience can have on our present, and potentially our future. In common with Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory, which contains potential to reshape the present and inform our future, Ricoeur also places emphasis on the importance of the human experience of time. Fictional narratives, importantly for Ricoeur, have a part to play in shaping our reality. It is a conviction he shares with Winnicott’ and his concept of playing. I support this argument and would go farther and suggest that our experiences are linked by an emotional chronology, rather than by chronology alone.

Ricoeur and my mother (fact and fiction)

When my mother left the orphanage, in an attempt to provide an historical back-ground for herself, she constructed a personal narrative, the plot of which resembles a nineteenth century colonial novel. Ricoeur (1990, cited in Blamey 1992: 162) suggests that in trying to capture “the elusive character of real life...we need the help of fiction”, and my mother had few facts and memories to draw on. By the time she married my father she had constructed a narrative that included some of the few facts she was aware of and produced a personal fictional

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APPLICATION FOR THE ADMISSION OF A CHILD

1.—Name of Child *Joan Dorion Winifred Harrison*
 Date of Birth *15 Nov 1921* Place of Birth *Kandy, Ceylon* If Baptised? *Yes* If Legitimate? *Yes*
 With whom is she now living? *with father Kandy, Ceylon*
 Nearest Railway Station *Manor Park G.E.R.*
 What Day School has he attended, and how long? _____ What Standard has he reached? _____
 What Sunday School? _____
 Has he been in the Workhouse? If so, when, where, and how long? *No*

2.—Father's name in full *Richard Walter Harrison* 3.—Mother's name in full *Winifred Mary Annal Harrison*

FATHER LIVING
 (a) Age *26*
 (b) Address *Kandy, Ceylon*
 (c) Occupation *Nothing*
 (d) Name and address of employer *none*
 (e) Health *Good*
 (f) Character *Good*
 (g) Religious denomination *Roman Catholic*
 (h) Is he a communicant of any Christian Church? *Yes*
 Of what Church? *Roman Catholic Church at Kandy*
 (i) Weekly rent paid *20 rupees per month*
 (j) If rent is in arrears, for how many weeks? _____

MOTHER LIVING
 (a) Age *22*
 (b) Address *31 Laurence Avenue Manor Park E.12*
 (c) Occupation *none*
 (d) Name and address of employer *none*
 (e) Health *Good*
 (f) Character *Good*
 (g) Religious denomination *Roman Catholic*
 (h) Is she a communicant of any Christian Church? *Yes*
 Of what Church? *at Kandy*
 (i) Weekly rent _____
 (j) If any is in arrears, for how many weeks? _____

FATHER DEAD
 (a) Date of death _____ Age _____
 (b) Cause of death _____
 (c) Occupation when living _____
 (d) Character _____
 (e) Name and address of employer _____
 (f) Religious denomination _____
 (g) Was he a communicant? _____

MOTHER DEAD
 (a) Date of death _____ Age _____
 (b) Cause of death _____
 (c) Occupation when living _____
 (d) Character _____
 (e) Name and address of employer _____
 (f) Religious denomination _____
 (g) Was she a communicant? _____

4.—
 (a) Full name and address _____
 (b) Occupation _____
 (c) Names and ages of any children by a previous marriage, dependent on step-parent _____
 (d) Names and ages of any children by present marriage dependent upon step-parent _____
 (e) Religious denomination _____

Form A

narrative that included some of the few facts she was aware of and produced a personal fictional narrative that might be contiguous with the cultural mores of the early 1940s. During her construction of a personal narrative, the Christian name Joan, that appears on the National Children's Home papers (NCH 2012)¹ documentation (see below), had vanished from everyday use to be replaced by a new name, Denise,

My mother's registration at the orphanage

which, from that point on, appears as a second, given name, for example on her marriage certificate to my father.

The plot of her constructed narrative claims that a rich tea planter, resident in England, had made a French maid in the household pregnant and, as a result, he is banished, together with the maid, from the family home in Hove, in the U.K., and sent to the family tea plantation in Kandy, Ceylon. My mother stressed that he had been instructed that he would be financed as long as he did not return to England. The child is born in Kandy, and a sister is also born. There is no doubt, from a critical theoretical (Ricoeur 1979) or a psychoanalytical perspective (Winnicott, 1980, Frosh 2002) that we need a narrative to make sense and interpret our lives, experiences and our relationship to the world we live in, and that some means of understanding our lived experiences may lay in the stories we tell each other (Ricoeur, 1979).

In this instance, my mother, unconsciously perhaps, constructs a false self, a narrative which she felt might appease her future mother-in-law who was protective and proud of her Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot son. In my experience my grandmother remained suspicious of my mother until the divorce and beyond, revealing some prejudices that reflected her own suburban background. As a child I recall tension between them. Nevertheless, I feel bound to add that my paternal grandmother remained a positive emotional constant in my childhood. To my father's family a colonial narrative with French blood was acceptable, a version that suggested Ceylonese blood would have proved more problematic. The narrative and background, I suggest, was in part constructed to appease her potential in-laws and make her acceptable to them, and thus enable her, as a war-time bride of the 1940s, to adopt a new identity to replace that of an unwanted orphan. It was also one which would enable her to acquire the identity of a middle class wife of an RAF pilot. She responded to the cultural circumstances she found herself in, and as a housewife in the 1940s she would have expected to be looked after and through her husband have a respected place in the world. I have the impression that she found this identity, and her new layer of self, exciting in a world which was in itself highly insecure. However, it was an identity that she later felt unable to sustain.

I think, but will never know for sure, that she knew she had Eurasian blood. She always claimed she had relatives in Sri Lanka. I have recently obtained records and a letter from the National Children's Home (NCH 2012) in which the girls are described as "Eurasian" in the

documents at the time of their admission to the orphanage. In my early memories mother always looked exotic and was very striking, with very dark hair and flashing black eyes. She stood out, but in marriage she sought an identity where she could at last “belong”. She told me that, when she was a teenager, a sister-carer in the home had told her to take the twinkle out of her black eyes, and she said she felt different from the other children. She encouraged me to read the children’s novel *The Secret Garden* (Hodgson Burnett, 1911) I suspect she identified with the protagonist. It relates the story of another child born of colonial parents, whose death in India, led her, a difficult and petulant child, to be sent “home” to Yorkshire, to live in a large, cold house in the north of England, owned by a relative who, for much of the novel, remains distant and illusive. The child, Mary, feels alien, but finally is settled, accepted and forms loving relationships. I see my mother playing with that fictional narrative, as I did, the child successfully finding the gate in the wall to the secret garden, which I read as a metaphor to satisfy a lacuna in the self, and which, in the novel, carries with it the self-development of Mary and the potential for a happy ending. My mother’s enjoyment of *The Secret Garden* could be understood as an example of what Winnicott identifies as an aspect of playing. Ricoeur notes “the most imaginary play elicits recognition”. (Ricoeur, 1972 cited in Valdes, 1991: 91), and he elsewhere argues “that literary narratives and life histories, far from being mutually exclusive are, complementary, despite, or even because of, their contrast.” (Ricoeur, 1990, cited in Blamey, 1992: 162) Although lacking in formal education my mother read comprehensively and continued to do so until her death.

The problem with assumed identities, Ricoeur (ibid. p. 167) terms them “acquired dispositions”, is that they are not a part of an inner-most stable sense of self. They are adopted in circumstances where we need and want to fit in. They are commensurate with Winnicott’s “false selves”, and may be a form of appeasement. They are a concept that we see socially and in our relationships with others in everyday life, smiling when we feel miserable, laughing at someone’s joke that is not funny. We are attempting to belong and be accepted.

In the case of my mother, she was forced to swap one acquired identity for another, after she was discovered by my father in a relationship with a naval commander. This led to the separation and divorce alluded to in the opening section of this article, the naval commander had aspirations to retire and lead the life of a country gentleman. In her new identity my

mother became a gardener, which she found she loved, and she discovered that she was naturally skilled. She also became a hostess and a Conservative party supporter and helper, without much personal commitment to the politics involved, it was what her new husband expected. Unfortunately for her, to these accomplishments, a necessary part of her new identity, were added the duties of a commander's batman and involved the hierarchical power arrangement that such a relationship suggests.

For most of her adult life my mother adhered to the original narrative of the lineage she had created, albeit losing six to seven years from her actual age before her second marriage. Possibly she considered it necessary since she thought that men placed emphasis on beauty and youth when committing to marriage, and a birth certificate did not exist to reveal her true age.

Middle and older age

However, in her middle age two events occurred. One was the re-emergence of the heart problems from her childhood, which entailed life-threatening surgery; the second was the decision to divorce her second husband. Events that were emotionally and chronologically linked. My mother claimed that she decided to divorce the ex-naval commander when he arrived in the intensive care unit, following her eight hours of open heart surgery, with a new iron for her, to the stupefaction and horror of the medical team.

However, it has to be acknowledged that at points in her second marriage my mother did feel secure and it was during this period that aspects of an applied creative self started to emerge. In middle age she started to paint, write poetry and short stories. She also became interested in the Sri Lankan part of her ancestry. Part of this might have been in response to her disillusionment with the second marriage, and an increasing lack of emotional connection with her husband. Until this stage in her life she seemed to favour uniformed and authoritative men, with a firm position in society, and who would look after her. It is not overstating, using a psychological perspective, to suggest that she needed a father figure, since the emphasis that Freudian psychoanalytical theory places on our earliest relationships indicates that a lacuna and potential problems remain if there have been parental absences or difficulties in our earliest relationships.

Jung, Erickson and middle age

There seem to be issues around my mother's mid-life in my reconstruction and attempt to understand her mother's biography; again, psychoanalytical theory helps. Jung (1935) suggests that a healthy mid-life requires individuation. It is a process by which we can fulfil our potential to become all that we can possibly be, a process that includes the emergence of a true self through balance of the whole personality. In middle age this process is subject to concerns of fading youth and aspirations, and an acceptance of mortality. Erikson (1959) a student of Freud, theorises on the eight stages that he sees as part of human psychosocial developmentⁱⁱⁱ. His eighth stage, generativity versus stagnation, states that the psychosocial conflict becomes centred on the need to create or nurture things that will outlast the individual. Erickson argues that people who do not find an outlet for generativity in middle age become self-indulgent or stagnant. It could be said that the creative drive that my mother found in middle age is allied to this agentic element. No-one who knew her would ever have described her as "stagnant". Part of Erikson's argument includes a concern for the community, care and nurture for others. My mother sought relationships with older women during and after her second marriage, caring for them, visiting them in the last stages of illness. It could also be argued that surrogate mother/daughter relationships were also being sought.

Both Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Winnicott's theory of playing, argue that development continues across a lifetime. It seems to me likely that in her later relationships my mother was exploring and playing, in anything but a trivial or reductive sense, in ways that suggest surrogate mothering and caring. A process that my mother may not have come to understand until later in life and which might account for my sensing a lack in my relationship with her. In the few years before she died, some 30 years ago, I observed a playful and imaginative side of her with my daughter, entering into the child's world in a way that seemed to me new rather than replicated. It may be that it took a relationship at one remove for my mother to play, or, more possibly, by later life learned experience and self-development had taken place to make her more secure. My mother's relationship with my daughter, sadly foreshortened, may have been an example of her realising some of the

emotional self-development missing in her earlier life, and which she was unable to provide for me.

Congruent with the creative and emotional development was my mother's active agency in trying to find out about her father and his family. I am suggesting that people seeking narratives of genealogy in middle age bring imagination to bear in accessing and attempting to understand the lives of the previous generations; my mother was in the sad position of having to imagine and create the lives of her immediate ancestors, even her parents. In her later life after her second divorce, at a time when she was not financially well-off, she paid someone, who tried unsuccessfully, to find evidence of her father in Sri Lanka. It was a costly undertaking since the internet was not available to enhance and speed up research activities.

The need to find out about her father in middle age may be attributable to elements in middle age or in a later life as part of our life cycle identified by Jung and Erickson, that include an awareness of mortality and death, which drives the subject to find out more of their genealogy. In my mother's case it also included a need to know about, and accept, her parents. Unfortunately, she did not live to see the documentation now in my possession: the records from the National Children's Home, and a copy of her parents' marriage certificate which indicates that she was not illegitimate, as she thought, despite her parents' separation and her mother's return to England. She might have been surprised, too, to discover what research has revealed to me. The Eurasian appearance noted by the children's home did not come from her mother but from her father. He was half Ceylonese, the offspring of a colonial relationship of the same grandfather who had rejected his two tiny grandchildren in 1921 and placed them in the children's home. His was the relationship that produced her mixed race father. Furthermore, it was her father who had been illegitimate not her. He came once to England when he enlisted for the First World War. Her parents' marriage certificate indicates that their marriage took place in England after the war, her mother came from Dorset, and my mother was born sometime after her parents returned to Ceylon. The records also indicate she was not the rebellious child she told me about, a half-year report from the home at the age of sixteen, describes her conduct as "Good. Shows consideration for others, and is generally helpful. Altogether a nice girl. Progress satisfactory." (NCH records, 1938) It could be argued that appeasement to figures in authority, that these comments might suggest, were rejected after a major crisis, or "turning point" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) of her first heart surgery; she

ignored advice of doctors, but appeasement lingered in her relationships with her two husbands. However, she was certainly rebellious by the time I was born, resisting medical advice about bearing children because of her heart condition, and horse riding into advanced middle age, revealing a love of horses which we both shared and which she has also passed on to her granddaughter.

In later life, in the years before her death, my mother was unmarried, cohabiting with a milder man, since she had come to regard marriage, as she writes in one of her poems, as a “cobweb shroud” (Mitton, 1978). She took part in the small village community, exhibiting her paintings, attending a writing group and publishing poetry. Soon after her second divorce she travelled to the United States of America to see her sister and family, the two sisters had always maintained contact since her sister left for the USA as a G.I. bride. She spent time with her grandchildren. There seemed to be a move away from the more superficial acquiring of identities, (Ricoeur, 1992) or false selves (Winnicott, 1980) in order to fit in and be accepted. It may be hoped she satisfied a drive for a wider understanding and meaning of her place in the world, but it can only be claimed to a limited extent because the evidence she sought has only recently become available to her daughter.

Conclusion

What does an investigation of this sort reveal? It is a very personal narrative, both my mother’s and mine. However, in a country with a colonial history there are many narratives with similar tensions and cultural stress points. After a conference presentation (European Society for the Research in the Education of Adults, 2013) where I shared a brief account of the above, a delegate approached me afterwards and said, “You just told my story.” I firmly support the idea that the analysis of an individual life at the micro level can have wide implications at the macro level. Merrill and West (2009: 24-5) argue that “For Shaw, and other symbolic interactionists, biographies revealed the interplay of the social and psychological in intimate and personal aspects of life...which tended to be missed altogether or overlooked or considered inconsequential in other forms of research”.

I am aware that I am writing from the privileged position of hindsight, with the availability of documents and records. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the fact that my mother died in

1985 I feel we are co-constructing. In writing this article I have come part way to alleviating pain, and acknowledging guilt, aggression and tensions that are a part of my selfhood as well as hers. A potential exists for capturing narratives to reach a deeper understanding of our closest relationships and an awareness of the way in which circumstances influence our self-development. A psychoanalytical perspective suggests that we make sense of our lives and lived experiences by the narratives we tell each other. Ricoeur, a critical theorist, supports the need for human beings to tell stories, extending the debate with his theory of emplotment, and calling for a broader hermeneutical approach in an attempt to gain understanding of various narratives and our place in them. He argues for the use of literature in the process and I extend and support his claims, and I suggest that it is at the intersection of fact and fiction that a space may be created where playing, in Winnicott's developed use of the term, and understanding may take place. An auto/biographical methodology of capturing lives requires an openness to interpretation that I see as essential when re-narrating and writing up the biographies of others. With Winnicott and Ricoeur I support an ontological interpretation of selfhood that sees the human being developing over a lifetime. We adopt false selves, appropriating different identities as circumstances may dictate. At the heart there is a view of the self as fragmented and vulnerable. The self may be troubled by experiences and lack of connection and poor object relating in the earliest relationships. "Playing" may help us to overcome or at least come to terms with some of the issues that may result.

The psychoanalytical theorists and practitioners cited in this paper suggest that a drive for a personal narrative may increase as the being moves into middle and old age. It proved to be the case with my mother; and is, perhaps, not unconnected with the reason I am researching my mother and my genealogy now.

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Notes

ⁱ Cartlidge, J. (2013) *Playing and Learning in Biographical Narratives: An inquiry into the learning lives of three older women*. PhD. Thesis.

ⁱⁱ Influenced by feminists and the theorising of Ricoeur, I support the argument that the reader brings his/herself to the text, following Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, a correlation of the self and the other is reached by a 'detour of reflection by way of analysis' (Ricoeur cited in Valdes 1991, p.16), another way of describing reflexivity so crucial to auto/biographical methodology.

ⁱⁱⁱ Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development are available online, see reference section. The eight stages are adapted from Erikson (1959) *Identity and the Life Cycle* in *Psychological Issues* vol. 1, no.1)