McGill Journal of Education
Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill

MJE RSEM

LUCY TOWNSEND & GABY WEINER. *Deconstructing and reconstructing lives: Auto / biography in educational settings.* London, ON: Althouse Press. (2011). 384 pp. Paper $42.95 (ISBN: 978-0-920354-69-8)

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BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

LUCY TOWNSEND & GABY WEINER. *Deconstructing and reconstructing lives: Auto / biography in educational settings*. London, ON: Althouse Press. (2011). 384 pp. Paper **$42.95** (ISBN: 978-0-920354-69-8).

Divided into four sections, *Deconstructing and Reconstructing Lives* introduces auto/biography as an important educational research method that can be used to illuminate educational issues through the personal. In the first chapter of the opening section, Weiner, the author of the section, stresses that biography is a useful research method in part because it can highlight individuals as "active in negotiating their identities within social and cultural norms and expectations" (p. 6). From a theoretical standpoint, she emphasizes three characteristics of auto/biography: "bridging the relationship between the individual and society, interactivity between subjective experience and historical setting, and active agency of the individual player" (p. 7). Anchored in this discussion, in the second chapter, Weiner points to key areas that need to be addressed in the analysis of auto/biography, such as the politics of identity, the politics of truth, the roles of narrative, and ethics.

The second and third sections are built on this framework. In the second section, Townsend and Weiner provide insights into various ways that auto/biography can be used for educational research and include concrete examples of how to put auto/biography into practice. Amongst the different forms of biography discussed are obituaries, biographical dictionary essays, chronologies (Chapter 3), life writing (Chapter 4), collective biography (Chapter 5), auto-biography and memoir (Chapter 6). In each chapter, the authors discuss key issues of each form and provide specific examples alongside useful questions that can be asked in analyzing them. The examples, which include writings about educational leaders in the 18th and 19th centuries, are not only useful for educators to learn how to include auto/biography in curriculum, but may also be fruitful for classroom discussion amongst students, whether in high-school or university programs.

Chapter 5 is particularly interesting from a methodological standpoint, as Weiner discusses collective biography in relation to more conventional research

approaches. She argues that size of sample, data sources, and voice are the most essential factors for the validity of research based on collective biography. She emphasizes that while the researcher's voice tends to be reduced in an individual biography because the size of the data set is typically large, it is not always the case when the researcher uses collective biography. She asks: Whose voice predominates—that of the participants/storyteller, or that of the researcher? (p. 147). This is a critical question in social science research. Concerning voice in research, Hertz (1996) wrote: "First there is the voice of the author. Second, there is the presentation of the voices of ones' respondents within the text. A third dimension appears when the self is the subject of the inquiry" (pp. 6-7). In many cases, as Hertz argued, the respondents' voices are filtered through the first voice and therefore distorted. If so, the discussion in this chapter provokes following questions: How can the researcher generalize experiences without taking the risk of suppressing the respondents' individual voices? How can the researcher balance these voices and her own? More fundamentally, why should the researcher be concerned about balancing the voices at all?

Throughout the book, the authors provide in-depth knowledge about auto/biography in plain and accessible language along with numerous examples and suggest a new way of doing research. However, in my understanding, the authors do not explicitly address *why* deconstructing or reconstructing lives are an important tool, especially for *educational* research. And yet, they invite a wide range of social science researchers to explore benefits and key issues of auto/biography for themselves in various contexts. The authors bring to light the potential of auto/biography as a non-conventional research method. This is a critical strength of the book.

Another strength is reflexivity: The authors introduce the issues of auto/biography as a research method by examining their own experiences. Reflexivity predominates, in the third section, in which Townsend invites readers to consider her own work in constructing auto/biography. In Chapter 7, she defines the biographer as a sleuth who tries to make sense out of fragmented bits of information. Reflecting on her experiences, she emphasizes that the biographer should have a specific lens to gain critical insight in order to pry into someone's life and bring about new knowledge. In her case, it was feminism. Although she does not place feminism at the centre of her argument, it appears that there are some profound links between feminism and auto/biography. Are feminist scholars more drawn to auto/biography than others? If so, why? While the authors do not offer an explicit answer to these questions, elucidating more clearly the connections between feminism and auto/biography would make a much more compelling resource for research.

In the closing section, the authors together recapitulate their arguments by emphasizing educational auto/biography as a research approach. Overall, each chapter of the book is seamlessly connected and easy to follow. The book

offers rich content and provokes thought. A researcher who is not familiar with auto/biography may find useful tips in taking up the method as a research tool. Literacy instructors may also find the book useful in engaging students in critical reading of biographical materials in their daily lives.

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Hertz, R. (1996). Introduction: Ethics, reflexivity and voice. *Qualitative Sociology*, *19*(1), 3-9.