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Taking a Detour?
Open University studies in Adult students' Life Historical Narratives[1]

1. Introduction

In this paper I aim to give a clear presentation of my research plans, context, central concepts and data collection. My study is in the context of Finnish education system, especially adult education and the Open University. I am focusing on the life historical narratives of non-traditional students in the Open University in University of Helsinki. Non-traditional students are determined in my study trough age (45-50 year old) and by educational background.

I aim to approach the life historical narratives trough narrative analysis and the concept of intersectionality or intersecting differences and agency. In terms of narrative analysis I am focusing on both the structure and the content of the narratives. My research questions are:

- *How are educational choices being narrated in life histories and what kind of agency is being constructed trough these narratives?*

- *What are the reasons for going to the Open University and what is the meaning of the studies in the students life histories?*

In this paper I will first introduce my context, which is the Finnish education system. Then I will open up my methodological approach focusing on the narrative and life historical approaches and combining them. Finally I will focus on the concepts of intersectionality and agency and also make some outlines for my data collection which is under progress and data analysis. As I do not yet have any analysis to show here I will take an analytic approach to my context trough analysing briefly some official speech about the Finnish education system.

2. Context of the Finnish Education System and the non-traditional student

> *The welfare of Finnish society is built on education, culture and knowledge. All children are guaranteed opportunities for study and self-development according to their abilities, irrespective of their place of residence, language or financial status. All pupils are entitled to competent and high-quality education and guidance and to a safe learning environment and well-being. The flexible*

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1 I am doing my research as part of these projects and groups:
OPULL (Opening Universities to Lifelong Learning) project, with Open University in University of Helsinki; Leuphana Universität Lüneburg; The University of Southern Denmark and The Open University (UK).
Constitutive Other in the Politics and Practices of Adult Education in Knowing capitalism, a new multidisciplinary collaborative research group and network coordinated by dr. Kristiina Brunila and dr. Ulpukka Isopahkala-Bouret.
Research Unit of Cultural and Feminist Studies in Education, directed by prof. Elina Lahelma.

education system and basic educational security make for equity and consistency in results. (Ministry of Education.)

The Finnish education system has gotten a lot of international attention after the release of PISA-study results. Finland was at the top of the results and has been seen as a model country of education since. In this introduction of the context of my study I aim to bring forth how the Finnish education system is on the one hand presented in the official way and on the other how it can be seen functioning in reality.

2.1. Finnish education system: promotion of equity

The Finnish education system is composed of nine-year basic education (comprehensive school), preceded by one year of voluntary pre-primary education; upper secondary education, comprising vocational and general education; and higher education, provided by universities and polytechnics. Adult education is available at all levels. (Ministry of Education.)

In this brief and compact quote the Finnish education system is defined quite thoroughly. This construction can also be illustrated in this picture:
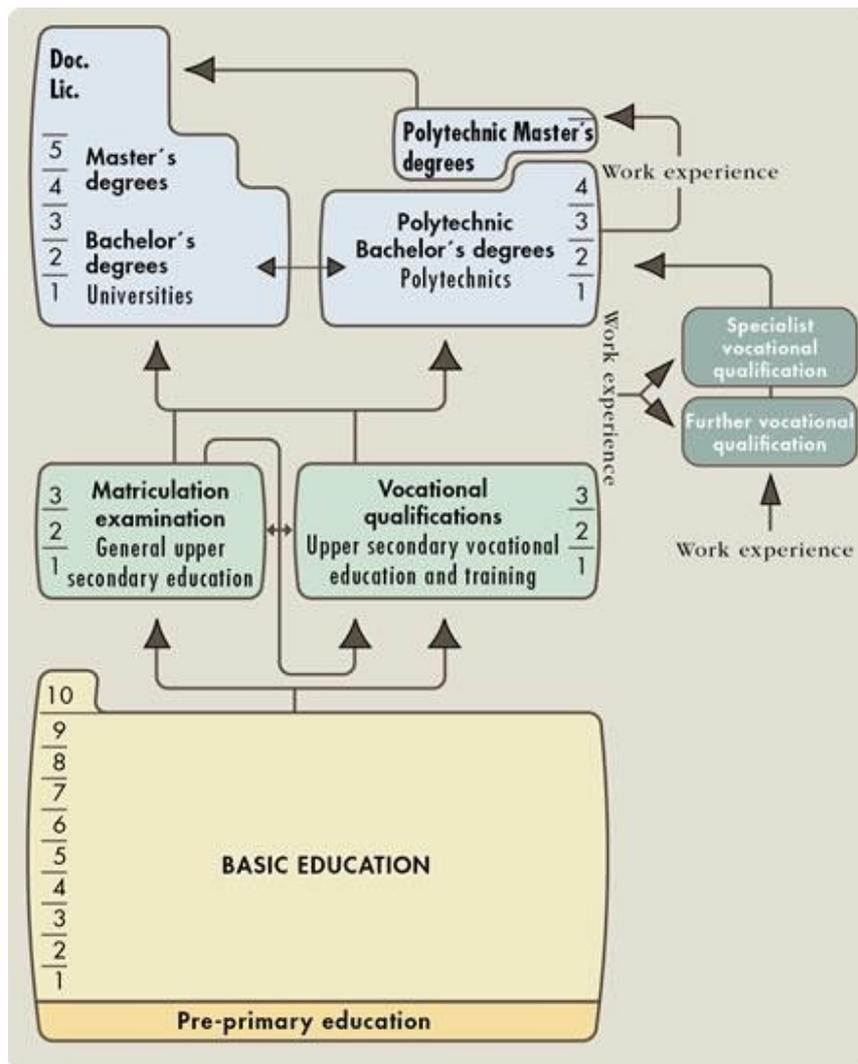
Picture 1: Finnish education system (Finnish National Board of Education).

The picture helps to grasp the transitions and possibilities inside the education system. The education field is divided into two fields (general and vocational) both in upper secondary level and tertiary level. In upper secondary level there is the general upper secondary education and the vocational upper secondary education. The participation to these different routes in 2009 after compulsory education was about 50% to general upper secondary education and 40% to vocational upper secondary education (National statistics 2010). In the field of higher education there is also a dual model of universities and polytechnics[2].

The duality of the education system does not rule out possibilities of transitions "across" the education system. The basic idea is that one can always get qualifications to the next level, when one has done the previous one. So the route to universities is open from both general upper secondary and vocational upper secondary education. However students with only vocational education as their qualification for university studies are a clear minority as only about 1 % of university students come with only vocational upper secondary education as their qualifications to the university (Ministry of Education 2010, 17).

The Finnish education system does not so much raise the question of widening access[3], but widening participation. The students are still very traditional as their educational background and social and ethnic background still seems to be quite homogenous. (Kivinen, Hedman, & Kaipainen, 2007.) Maybe the most visible change in recent decades is the adultification of higher education (Rinne, Haltia, Nori & Jauhiainen 2008, 44).

2.2. University education in Finland

The development of the university field can be opened up with the terms of widening, specialisation and rising. Widening refers to the education policies that have made it so that universities have been spread out trough Finland. Specialisation refers to the founding of specialised universities such as technical, economics, art and Swedish speaking universities. Rising then describes how some universities have risen from being a lower level educational institution to being a university. In addition to these developmental lines in the 20th century, one of the biggest changes in the field of Finnish higher education was the founding of polytechnics in the mid 1990's. This created a dual model into the Finnish higher education field. (Lampinen 2003, 121- 123, 113- 114.) The Bologna process has also developed the Finnish higher education system further as it has done for other European countries as well. This duality is being described as complimentary by the Ministry of Education:

> *The Finnish higher education system consists of two complementary sectors: polytechnics and universities. The mission of universities is to conduct scientific research and provide instruction and postgraduate education based on it. Polytechnics train professionals in response to labour market needs and conduct R&D which supports instruction and promotes regional development in particular.* (Ministry of Education.)

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2 They are now called universities of applied sciences in English. I will use the term polytechnic as it is clearer as it does not cause confusion between what is an traditional university and what is a polytechnic.

3 Although it could be argued that the access here seems to be of a theoretical level, so there could be a lack of "true" or "practical" access to higher education, especially universities.

This description of the dual model seems quite ideal, but in reality the relationship of these two sectors seem to be quite ambivalent as they are the same level, but not always fully corresponding to each other.

University education in Finland has also followed the trend of massification (Kivinen, Hedman & Kaipainen 2007). Universities have opened the selves up for different groups from the beginning of 20th century. One of the biggest steps towards educational equality was the opening of universities to women about 140 years ago. (Engman 2005, 37.) Still I would argue that the Finnish education system does exclude or does not courage participation for a very large variety of people. Still for example social background (see Kivinen, Hedman & Kaipainen 2007), and educational background seem to have a great influence on participation in university studies.

The Finnish Open University was born in the beginning of 1970's. As example for the Finnish system there was already an Open University model created in the UK in 1969. The basis of the Finnish Open University is also in the folk education work in the 1800's. The Finnish Open University was based on providing people a second chance to higher education. (Rinne, Jauhiainen, Tuomisto, Alho-Malmelin, Halttunen & Lehtonen 2003, 37- 38.) There have been some qualification demands in the past even for the Open University (e.g. age limit) (Rinne et. al. 2003, 38), but now there are no qualification requirements to Open University (Open University, Uni.Helsinki). Open universities in Finland are located in each university, so it is not a independent institution as in the UK, but part of every university.

> *Open University education is open to all regardless of age or educational background. Students may have different goals: to improve general knowledge, to upgrade their basic education or to work toward self-development. Studying at the Open University also provides an idea of what studying at university is like and helps one to prepare for academic degree studies.* (Avoinyliopisto.com)

This quote from a joint web page of all Open Universities of Finland and it has captured two main things of the Finnish Open University. One is that the doors are being open to all. However here are mentioned only educational background and age. Other diversities or differences that could be mentioned are ethnicity, locality, social background and gender. However I think that these things are implied in the text as in Finland it is not a custom to mention these things.

The quote also raises the important thing of variety of motives for studying in the Open University. The goal of a degree in the Open University is not mentioned as such, as it is not possible to do a degree in the Open University. Students in the Open University must apply or gain entrance to the degree studies either through a special Open University route[4] or through traditional entrance exams. (e.g. Rinne, Haltia, Nori & Jauhiainen 2008, 46.) The Open University's role is interesting because the studies are part of degrees and the teachers and courses are approved by faculties of each university, but still they cannot grant degrees for their students. Open Universities represent the openness of the universities in Finland, but it is still somewhat excluded from "full academic" status because they cannot give degrees. This in my opinion has to do with the selectiveness nature of university studies in Finland.

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4 This route means that the student has done certain amount of studies with certain success. The decisions are made by the Faculty to which the student applies to. This route has been analysed as very narrow (Rinne, Haltia, Nori & Jauhiainen 2008, 43, 46).

2.3. Lack of access or lack of participation? The non-traditional student if Finland

Even though the Finnish education system offers access to education quite flexibly, there is still the matter of the students being quite homogenous. Especially educational background, especially not doing matriculation examination (Ministry of Education 2010), seems to have great influence on how ones educational path forms. Also social background and parent's education still firmly influences who is coming and getting in to the universities (Kivinen, Hedman & Kaipainen 2007).

This raises the question that is this matter of lacking access or lacking participation? Access is provided in the level of the educational system and its design. However if the routes are not being used what does that tell? An optimistic standpoint could argue that this merely means that the vocational route is working and the students find satisfaction and work in their field that they have chosen. This argument could be partly true, but as unemployment rates for young people finishing upper secondary education is quite high, it does seem quite optimistic. One could also argue that the access provided by the education system is more of an ideal that cannot be turned into reality in most cases. There seems to be some kind of bloc or barrier for using the path from vocational training to universities. This is one thing that interests me and this is also a question I aim to research in my thesis. Non-traditional students in universities can be defined at least by age, educational background and social background. In my study the group of students that I am interested about are those with no matriculation examinations and age 45 to 50. Their social background is something that I aim to grasp in the interviews.

3. Life Historical and Narrative Approach

In this section I will discuss the methodological approaches I plan to use in my research. I will discuss this briefly. The two main components of my methodological approach are narrative and life historical approaches. I plan to combine them with poststructuralist feminism, but this is still largely under construction and presented here at its most as preliminary thoughts.

3.1. Theories and concepts

Narrative and life history approach in this kind of study can be very useful. As Richard Waller (2010, 58) says"...and how apparently highly personal stories can illustrate wider social change" I do see this as a strength and base for choosing these approaches. Life historical and narrative approaches have been used in the study of education and adult education as well in Finland (see Siivonen 2010, Moore 2003, Ojala 2011) and elsewhere (see Reay 2003; Reay, Ball & David 2002; Goodson & Sikes 2001).

Narrative research in humanistic and social scientific research is traced back to "a narrative turn" in the 1980's (Hyvärinen, Hyden, Saarenheimo & Tambokou 2010, 1). Narrative analysis is a broad term because it can be defined in various ways. It all goes back to how we define narrative, to which there is also many options available. The concept of narrative can be linked with a story. Story the can be linked with the idea of a plot, or turning points or accounts of experience that create a change. (e.g. Wells 2011, Riessman 2000.) Narrative analysis then can be roughly divided into research that focuses on the content of narratives and the ones that focus on the structure of the narrative. (Wells 2011.)

In my research I define narrative as a story of experience that is meaningful enough to be told. Narratives in my research appear in the context of life histories. Life histories could be seen as narratives the selves, but I see them more as having many smaller narratives (see Siivonen 2010). I find that many features that are said to define narrative, for example coherence, temporality, change, evaluation etc. are not always present in narratives. This is why I do not wish to set fixed terms for narratives, rather I aim to define narrative throughout my analysis. One thing that I aim to criticise is the demand or expectation of coherence. Coherence has been seen as a central term in narratives and life histories. In my research I will join those who have critiqued and questioned the use of coherence (Hyvärinen et.al. 2010) as it does seem to be quite ideal or categorising or even violent to try to frame experience into the frame of coherence. Coherence to me seems to be more of a cultural way of reading people's lives. In my study I aim to allow the interviewees to break from this demand or expectation of coherence.

3.2. Doing Narrative and Life Historical Interviews

One goal I have set for my research is to collect life history accounts that include narratives that are small narrated stories of events or situations. I aim on interviewing ten students. The interviews will be life historical interviews that would consist of two meetings per person. The central thing in my interviews is to create space and opportunity for remembering the past and narrating. Creating space for narrating can be approached trough a way of asking about their lives. I plan on requesting the interviewees to *tell* me about something rather that forming tightly limited questions. (Wells 2011.)

Waking up memories from the past and especially school experiences and events, I will send the interviewees an outline of the interview themes or content. This has also been used by Erja Moore (2003) and I think it is a good way to give the participants a chance to get ready for the interview and start to memorise the past before the interview. The second interview meeting is in my plans also because I think that then we can revisit some memories that might have come up after the first meeting and on the other had it also gives me as a researcher an opportunity to revisit some themes and things that may have been left a bit open and test my preliminary findings or thought about the interesting points of the interview (see Ojala 2011).

4. Agency and intersectionality: Feminist point of view

In this section I will very briefly open up how I plan to utilise the concepts of agency and difference in my research. Both concepts could be introduced far more thoroughly, but I will leave it to another time and place. Here I will just open up some ideas I have of defining and using the concepts.

Agency can be traced to the crossing point of social and structural elements and the individual. Agency can be traced as possibilities of acting and taking positions, but also to a more subtle way of doing or even not doing. Agency can be connected to power and resources. Seeing agency merely as active actions is limiting and leaving out some important and relevant ways of subjects to cope and take agency (see Honkasalo 2009). In my study I

combine the concept of agency to differences[5] and their joint or collaborate influence on possibilities in acting and being. This is why I need to introduce the term of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a concept that came up in the 1990's when Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) talked about the intersection of gender and race in the African American women's experiences. This is a concept that helps to analyse experiences and situations where differences interplay and cause a joint effect that cannot be traced to any single difference (gender, race, ethnicity, age etc.), but is as Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix say a "multiple axis of differentiation" (Brah & Phoenix 2004, 76). This of course means identification of the intersecting differences and then a challenging task of analytically approaching this intersection of differences and its aspects. The use of the concept of intersectionality means that I will have to define central differences which are intersecting. Differences in my study are those of gender, social class, educational background and age. Intersectionality as a concept has also been critiqued as it is difficult to actually use as an analytical tool in a way that goes beyond listing differences. The word itself has also received critique, because it implies a clear intersection point, when usually the intersections of differences can be layered and one can be more meaningful that something else etc. (e.g. Valovirta 2010, 94.) Even if though the concept has its challenges and problems I find it to be useful and I also find it interesting to combine intersectionality with agency.

5. Towards data and analysis

In this paper I have focused on describing and analysing the context of my study and also introduced briefly my thoughts on methodological and theoretical grounds of the study. The context and the central interest is in the education system of Finland and how can a person with "non-traditional" educational background for university studies find their way to university, especially Open University, and what is the meaning of these studies for an adult student.

Narrative analysis and life histories provide the methodological frame for my data collection and analysis. Agency and differences are the theoretical scopes trough which I plan to open up my data. Now my main concern is to produce my interview data and also to consider whether to include some official documents to my data.

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5 By difference I mean certain features of categories of diversity (such as gender, race, age, sexuality etc.) that create unequal positions and agency for people.

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