

Using Life Histories in Social Policy Research: The Case of Third Sector/Public Sector Boundary Crossing

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Abstract

The life-history method is a valuable tool for social policy research. Taking an anthropological approach to studying policy, the article analyses the usefulness of the method using data drawn from a set of recently collected life-work histories from the UK. These life-work histories document the experiences of individuals who have crossed over between the public sector and the ‘third sector’ during their careers. The article first briefly reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the life-history method, then goes on to analyse selected issues and themes that emerge from the data at both the contextual and the individual levels. The article concludes that life-history work adds to our knowledge of the relationship between these two sectors, and of the processes through which ideas about ‘sector’ and policy are constructed and enacted.

Introduction

This article makes the case for using the life-history method in social policy research. It illustrates the method’s relevance by showing the ways through which it can illuminate important aspects of the relationship between the ‘third sector’ and the public sector.¹ After first briefly introducing the method and its basic strengths and weaknesses, the article moves on to discuss some recently collected life-history data from the UK that draw on the experiences of individuals who have crossed between the two sectors.² The accounts provided by these particular types of social actor are useful in that they help us: to understand better the nature of the sector boundary and the assumptions behind the way this boundary is conceptualised; to locate the movement of individuals across the boundary within changing forms of governance in which ‘self-organising networks’ of public, private and third sector organisations and individuals increasingly interact within a deregulated policy environment (Rhodes, 1996); and to consider issues of power and co-option across sector boundaries, often characterised as involving “‘revolving doors” between corporations, government and the “non-profit” sector’ (Zehle, 2003: 1).³

A life history is defined by Watson and Watson-Franke as ‘any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, in written or oral form, *that has been elicited or prompted by another person*’ (1985: 2, authors’ italics). Despite its earlier popularity in several areas of the social sciences, the method fell from favour in the 1950s when positivist paradigms became dominant, before re-emerging during the 1980s within several fields. These included the oral history movement that was interested in seeking new historical perspectives from the ‘bottom-up’ (Thompson, 1988), feminist researchers’ efforts to recover women’s ‘hidden narratives’ (Middleton, 1993), action researchers who wished to ‘empower’ research subjects in education and social work (Bron and West, 2000; Dhunpath, 2000), medical researchers concerned with obtaining better patient histories (Hagemaster, 1992) and, finally, post-modernists who saw value in destabilising grand narratives and celebrating diverse accounts of social life. The study of life histories ‘has now developed into a significant, theoretically dense, and diverse sub-set of historical and social-scientific enquiry’ (Godfrey and Richardson, 2004: 144).

Yet the life-history method is rarely used within mainstream social policy, nor has it been deployed within the emerging field of third sector or non-profit research. Taking an anthropological approach to policy (cf Shore and Wright, 1997), this article aims to contribute to research that analyses the everyday experiences of civil servants and third sector professionals as a means of understanding policy processes (see Won, 2007).

My own work–life history has helped inform my interest in this topic. While undertaking long-term fieldwork during graduate studies in the mid-1980s on rural development in eastern Bangladesh, I became intrigued by the local influence of the life and work of the late A. H. Khan. Khan was a senior civil servant known, among other things, for his innovative work in establishing the influential Comilla rural cooperative model in the 1960s (Raper, 1970). During the 1980s, he went on to found the equally acclaimed Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, Pakistan where he helped to develop a new community-led approach to the upgrading of slum dwellings.⁴ What fascinated me about Khan’s career – in addition to the originality and creativity of the initiatives for which he is still remembered – was the changing sector context to his work: the Comilla work had been conducted within the public sector, while the institutional location for Orangi was the third sector. I therefore became interested in the factors that motivate people who cross between sectors, and wondered whether Khan’s reputation as a policy innovator was in some way bound up with his acts of ‘boundary crossing’. These ‘transgressive’ acts appeared particularly relevant at a time when government and NGOs were seen as belonging to very distinct and separate institutional worlds.

Later, in 1990, while engaged in fieldwork in the Philippines on NGO-government relationships, I found that significant numbers of NGO-based

activists had ‘crossed over’ into government departments within the Aquino administration that came into office in 1986 after the fall of the authoritarian Marcos regime (Miclait-Teves and Lewis, 1993). This phenomenon struck me as interesting because it seemed to challenge, or at least complicate, the prevailing models of the institutional order – state, market and civil society – used by policy makers in relation to the then-emerging new frameworks of ‘good governance’. I made a mental note to find a future opportunity to discover how such people fared in their journeys across sector boundaries. Finding that such boundary crossing was becoming an increasingly common feature of many country contexts, both in the ‘industrialised’ and the ‘developing’ worlds, I decided to undertake a comparative research project and investigate it more systematically.⁵

The life-history method: a short review

New interest in the use of narratives within social science has helped to re-focus attention on the life-history method. For Elliott (2005: 3), a narrative ‘organis[es] a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole’ and thereby becomes a tool for conveying ‘the meaning of events’. With the ‘narrative turn in social studies’ that took place in the 1980s, there was renewed interest in the idea that the production of a narrative is an essentially ‘social’ process, mediated between narrator and listener (Czarniawska, 2004). The use of individual narrative also makes it possible to link personal experience with broader patterns of institutional change:

The stories people tell, from such a perspective, are not isolated, individual affairs but reflect and constitute the dialectics of power relations and competing truths within the wider society. (Bron and West, 2000: 159)

A review of the literature on the life-history method suggests that there are four main areas of strength that the method can bring to social policy research. The first is that the method can provide a high level of historical depth and ethnographic detail. It focuses on the ‘temporal dimension’ of social action through the trajectory of an individual’s life and work, and on their relationship with wider context (Elliott, 2005: 4). The result is a potential for ‘re-historicising’ our understanding of policy narratives, which is important because powerful policy actors may downplay history in order to present their ideas as novel (Lewis, 2006). The method offers deep description, texture and detail – the so-called ‘being there’ quality of good ethnography (Geertz, 1988) – and can therefore provide a counterbalance to the tendency for over-generalised policy framing, a common problem in relation to the diversity and messiness of the third sector. For example, the government’s conception of its relationship with the UK ‘voluntary and community sector’ as a ‘Compact’ is couched in terms such as ‘the different roles, accountabilities and powers of each sector can result in misunderstandings,

suspicion and sometimes conflict' and calls for 'effective partnerships' that require mutual understanding and clear "terms of engagement" (Home Office, 2005: 19).

A second strength is the method's potential for helping to move forward the long-standing challenges involved in the linking of structure and agency within the social sciences. While Giddens' (1979) theory of 'structuration' has attempted to formulate ideas about the inter-relationship between structure and agency, '[c]losing the gap between the individual and the social order remains a constant source of debate' (Goodley, 1996: 336). Theories of social action – and policies too – are weakened when they 'fail to adequately immerse themselves in the worlds of those that they attempt to understand', and researchers must beware the pitfalls that come from reliance on concepts and models that simply reflect 'a fictional non-existing world constructed by the scientific observer' (Schutz, 1964, cited by Goodley, 1996: 336).

A third area of strength is that the method can help to humanise the research process. For example, governance processes are not simply generated by the functions of pre-constituted structures of government and other agencies, but rather are culturally produced through people's 'everyday practices and encounters' at different levels (Sharma and Gupta, 2006). For Plummer (1983), the use of the life-history method helps to reinforce a 'humanist tradition' in social science, and the method places its emphasis on 'the importance of attempting to understand the meaning of behaviour and experiences from the perspective of the individuals involved' (Elliot, 2005: 4). Within development studies, Long's (2001) 'actor-oriented perspective' seeks a similar perspective on structure and agency. Following from this emphasis on the agency of social actors, the life-history method can also therefore give voice to marginalised sections of the community, such as subaltern classes, women or people with disabilities in a way that 'gives history back to people in their own words', potentially rescuing it from dominant elitist discourses (Thompson, 1988: 265).

Finally, the life-history method is useful because it can challenge received wisdoms by generating nuanced accounts that subvert established knowledge. It can sometimes play a 'counter-cultural role' by prompting researchers to question their assumptions through a deeper level of contact with personal narratives. For example, the method works 'against the grain' of orthodox representations of teachers that are underpinned by conventional views of power 'held and produced by politicians and administrators' (Goodson, 1992). Life histories have become important in relation to post-modern challenges to grand narrative since they can create multiple and diverse 'little narratives' that contest 'the stability of received knowledge' (Gardner, 2002: 28).

But use of the life-history method is not without its problems. There are also four main areas of weakness presented by the method. Rather than allowing subjects to speak for themselves, critics of life histories point to the power of authorial control. A researcher does not simply 'give voice' in a straightforward

way, but in practice he or she decides what goes in and what is taken out of the account, and makes crucial decisions about how the material is framed (Gardner, 2002). For example, anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1961) used life histories in his influential book on Mexican poverty but was taken to task by critics – including the Mexican government itself – for presenting vivid first-person accounts that were in fact edited texts, their voices ‘highly contrived and reconstructed by Lewis himself’ (Atkinson, 2004: 391). There is always a danger that ‘the telling occurs through the mediation of a researcher who has a vested interest in the story’ (Dhunpath, 2000: 549).

Secondly, there is the difficulty of generalising from life-history data. But, as with any social science method, the rationale for selection needs to be made transparent, and a high level of reflection and critical judgement deployed in the data analysis. Godfrey and Richardson argue that life-history analysis merely requires standard interpretive methods:

plausibility and authenticity of the evidence (whatever weight one puts on an individual’s narration within/to these social scripts); reference to other evidential forms; and the imaginative construction and understanding of the historical content. (2004: 151)

The issue of ‘contamination’ of data within subjective accounts that are co-produced by informant and researcher is a third problem. Advocates of the method argue that such biases cannot be avoided but that the strength of the method is the way that it necessitates reflection on the issues of power. According to Plummer (1983), this active process of ‘reflection’ is a necessary part of life-history research at both the stages of collecting and writing up life stories.

Finally, the method asks a great deal of both researcher and informant. The sheer volume of work involved in the interview transcription, and the challenge of organising interview data into coherent themes, mean that it is almost impossible to over-estimate the heavy demand on researcher time that this creates (Musson, 1998). Furthermore, informants can vary significantly in their capacity to ‘perform’ a life-history narrative. The ‘precise balance of personal and social’ in the interpretation can be a constant source of tension and unease. It can be very difficult to work with a relatively inarticulate narrator where the data produced are fragile and require care to interpret.

Using the approach in the UK: ideas and findings

Before moving on to the next section where illustrative research findings from the UK life-history data are discussed, it is first necessary briefly to contextualise the wider research project of which these data form a part, and to describe the specific type of life history that was used in the work.

Background to the study

The ‘three sector idea’ – government, private and ‘third’ – has become firmly established as a theoretical model used by social science researchers (Etzioni, 1973; Lewis, 2007). It has also come to act as a ‘policy model’ that helps to map institutional landscapes and structure policies among governments and funders, and forms a cornerstone for the idea of public–private partnerships that have become ‘a key tool of public policy across the world’ since the 1990s (Osborne, 2000: 1). For example, it informs the concept of partnership between government agencies and NGOs that remains central to the ‘good governance’ and poverty reduction policy agendas of the World Bank (Lewis *et al.*, 2003), while in the UK the post-1997 ‘compact’ between the voluntary sector and the government has been a key element of new Labour policy (Kendall, 2003). Research on the ‘third sector’ has also grown into a significant social science sub-field.

While it may be analytically convenient to separate the three sectors, the realities are more complex. There has been little research to date on the types of relationships and forms of power that link structures and processes *across* the sectors. How are these constructed, both by individual agency and by broader contextual aspects of politics, history or culture? A key challenge for research is therefore to examine the relationship between such policy models – and the theories that may underpin them – and the realities that such models seek to represent and influence. The boundary-crossing study aims to learn from the career trajectories and experiences of individuals who travel between the third sector and the public sector. It documents the motivations and experiences of those who have crossed over, and it seeks to explore the broader meanings and implications of these movements.

A total of 20 boundary-crossing individuals were identified for detailed life-work histories in the UK. This process followed the ‘purposive’ or ‘theoretical’ sample approach, as outlined within the ‘grounded theory’ of Glaser and Strauss (1967). Informants were selected in order to provide as wide a representation as possible, based on likely sources of difference between individuals. Interviewees were identified using a snowballing technique that began with enquiries among colleagues and friends known to the researcher from previous work, and then a trail of contacts was followed outwards. A spread of informants was attempted that would best illustrate the main types – though not the extent – of boundary crossing. The interviews were conducted with mainly urban, middle-class informants. A balance of ethnic background, age and gender among informants was sought wherever possible. Life-work histories were taken in the course of recorded interviews lasting between one and three hours with each person.⁶ Each interview began with an invitation to begin a narrative by telling the story of an informant’s earliest paid or unpaid work or activist experiences, and then followed from there with a minimum of intervention from the interviewer

except to clarify or expand a point, or to keep the narrative on track when it was judged to be moving too slowly or quickly.

Of the 20 life-work histories collected, 12 informants were female and eight were male. The average age of the informants was late 40s/early 50s, with the youngest in her early 30s and the oldest in her late 50s. Three were from ethnic minority communities. Eight worked in what might be termed the international development part of the public or third sector, while ten worked in the 'domestic' UK voluntary sector. Only two persons had been active in both of these fields, and one of these had not actually worked overseas. Most informants were interviewed in or around the London area. Care has been taken in writing up the life histories to maintain the anonymity of all informants who took part in the study by concealing the identities of specific individuals and organisations.⁷

'Life-work history': adapting the method

In order to investigate the sector boundary-crossing phenomenon, experiences of work (whether in terms of formal career, activism, volunteering) were placed at the centre of the life-history data to be collected. As a consequence, the method employed was not a pure type of open-ended life-history research but was instead a form of what Ladkin calls 'life and work history analysis':

The career of an individual refers to a sequence of activities or roles through social networks and settings. . . . From a subjective standpoint, a career can be seen as a projection of future events and their anticipated significance, or a vantage point based on interpretations of experience as a person moves through life. . . . it is clear that an individual's work history is linked to many other events within their life, and that a person's life history is a product of multiple histories defined by time and event sequence. (1999: 40)

This topic of cross-over⁸ is a relatively new one and has not so far attracted much attention from the third sector research community. One exception is a study by Little and Rochester (2003), which draws attention to one particular aspect of the cross-over phenomenon: the experiences of a sub-set of six voluntary sector people who were brought into government in order to use their knowledge to inform government policy towards the third sector. It concluded that the cross-overs played a role in mediating issues between government policy and the third sector, but that they were still unable to influence it from within: 'voluntary sector leaders who move into government ameliorate the way in which government works in partnership with the sector rather than shape what the partnership is actually based on, a policy agenda which has already been set' (p. 13). The present study partly bears out this finding, but it also suggests a more complex picture by considering a wider range of experiences.

Illustrative research insights from the UK data

Individuals interviewed in the UK fall into three main categories. The first category includes those who began in the broad public sector (mainly starting a career with local authorities or the civil service) and over time have ended up working in the third sector. The second are those who began in the third sector but have, for one reason or another, crossed over and remain in jobs within the public sector. The third category are people who have moved to new jobs (or been temporarily seconded) from the third sector to the public sector and have now returned to the third sector, either because their term of work ended or simply because they did not like being there. A fourth category are people who retain contacts and relationships that allow them to simultaneously operate within and across both sectors.

Analysis of the interviews was undertaken by first identifying a set of common themes around boundary crossing that emerged from the narratives. These included motives for crossing over, reflections on what was achieved, experiences of different organisational cultures, lesson learning, personal and work identities, patronage and power, and the negotiation of transition. Issues that emerged from the life histories were then classified into contextual insights and individual-level insights. These are briefly reviewed below.

Contextual insights

In the course of a life-work history, we learn a great deal about the initial formative experiences that shape a third sector career. For those working on the international development side, factors such as growing up in an expatriate household, or moving to the UK from a commonwealth country, or simply embarking on an 'alternative' life-style based on post-university travel, are all factors that may contribute to early career momentum in community and development work. For those working in the domestic third sector in the UK, a family background of volunteering, a post-university job with a politically radical local authority in social work or planning, or a decision to participate in community development in local areas of disadvantage were common starting points.

The narratives tell us about career origins and their relationship to wider policy change. By setting the narrative of community or development work within a broader life context, the result is an 'unlocking' of existing third sector research perspectives that can seem too sector-focused and inward looking. For example, a fact that is underplayed in histories of the UK voluntary sector is the importance of early formative work with public sector local authorities as a 'launch pad' for future activity in the third sector. In the 1970s, the areas of social work and planning were both seen as desirable places to work for people with left-of-centre or community-based politics after they left university, such as in progressive local

authorities of Wandsworth and Sheffield discussed by two informants.⁹ It was at the end of the decade, when it became clear that Conservative politics was ascendant, that such people moved into the third sector as a refuge from the change of political leadership or, in the case of councils that remained Labour-controlled, an exit from an increasingly constrained wider policy climate in the public sector, and into a location from which to contest it.

Following from this, a second set of contextual insights relates to the wider conditions that can prompt boundary crossing. Both political and economic factors can make crossing over an attractive option. On the economic side, public sector jobs tend to be better paid than third sector ones, and while this may not have been a factor at early stages of a career it becomes more important later on, such as when a person starts a family. The availability of new jobs in an expanding public sector agency may also prompt a shift across from the third sector. There is also boundary crossing that is value-driven, such as the person in government who comes to feel that work in the third sector will be more fulfilling, and a significant number of shifts that occur more on the basis of happenstance – such as an opportunity arising through a chance meeting or a personal contact – than planned career shift. There is an increasing extent of job mobility in the UK apparent from the life histories. Most informants have undertaken a relatively large number of different jobs, both within and between sectors, with a period of two to three years in a particular job quite common.

The movement of people from the third sector into government has also been intensified by political interest in the idea of ‘secondment’. Secondment is not a new phenomenon (one informant was seconded from the third sector to government in the 1970s, for example), but it has become far more common under the New Labour government in the period since 1997. Increasing numbers of key people from within the voluntary and community sector have been brought into government either on a short-term or long-term basis. One high-profile example of this was Louise Casey from Shelter, initially the ‘rough sleepers tsar’ and later heading the government’s Anti-Social Behaviour Unit. This trend, which accelerated in the Blair era, had both positive and negative effects, according to an informant who left the Home Office for the third sector after more than 20 years as a civil servant:

I mean, there’s something deeply appealing about it, you know it’s ‘big tent’ staff, it’s getting the experts in, it’s focusing pragmatically on delivery, and not being too ideological about it. I mean all that’s great. But there’s also something . . . a bit sort of . . . *sinister* about it, because it’s about neutralising dissent. I mean it’s about power, it’s deeply controlling.

People who cross over may change their views based on their shift of location and perspective. As a consequence of their experience, some come to challenge the commonly held stereotypes of the sectors. For people who have spent a lifetime in the third sector, this can be little short of a revelation, sometimes leading to a

dramatic shift of perspective on the shortcomings of the third sector left behind, or on the sector's incomplete understanding of the realities of government. For example, one of the life-work history narratives documents the changing ideas of a person with more than a decade of experience within the NGO community attempting to influence government policy through lobbying, before moving over to a position within Department for International Development (DFID). He describes how cross-over led him to learn more about the policy process, and reflects on the limited understanding that he and his NGO had:

I felt I'd run my course with [the NGO], again for a combination of push-pull factors . . . one of the ones was a sense that as an NGO trying to lobby government . . . I reached the point at which you could continue to say things to government and so on, but they weren't necessarily hearing. And I didn't feel that I had skills or knowledge to know why that was. Having come in [to DFID], I began to understand why that was.

Or conversely, cross-over may prompt a discovery or reinforcement of a third sector identity as a result of an unsatisfactory encounter with the public sector. There are some disaffected people in government (and indeed in the private sector) who have come to view the third sector as a 'better' place in which to organise their work. One prominent example is Martin Narey, formerly at the Home Office but now Chief Executive at the children's charity Barnardo's. For Narey, crossing over has been a highly formative experience to which he openly refers, renouncing his former role and criticising government policy:¹⁰

Having worked in the Home Office for more than 20 years, I thought I was reasonably aware of how we treat asylum-seekers. I had seen Home Secretaries struggle with the public and media pressure surrounding the growth in the number of refugees. And in truth, I sometimes thought that asylum-seekers' claims that they faced torture or death in their home countries might – understandably – be exaggerated. I now work for Barnardo's, and I realise how little I knew. I feel ashamed that I could have been so ignorant of the poverty to which we condemn these families.

Some individuals on both sides have found secondment to be a positive and creative experience. It has also had the effect of creating a 'flow' of people travelling back from government into the third sector, either because their secondment ended, or as a result of disaffection. Opportunities for moving into government after 1997 led to splits in many third sector organisations between those who wanted to work with the New Labour government's social reform agenda to try to bring about wide-scale change from the inside, and those who wished instead to maintain a 'critical outsider' role for the sector and avoid co-option.

Those returning from government to the third sector, even when their experience had been an unhappy one, usually claimed that their improved level

of knowledge about administrative and policy process was a valuable asset for their future work:

[T]here is quite a difference in the working culture . . . I think I appreciate it much more . . . I mean, it enables me to do my job now much better.

Some of those third sector people who stayed in government spoke of how their perspective on the sector they had left behind had now changed. It had become more negative, in the sense that they sometimes saw the sector as being more disorganised, naive or piecemeal in its impacts, than they had done previously.

This increasing level of 'exchange' between the sectors has become an important part of UK public life, although it has probably not yet reached the point at which it blurs the boundaries of individual, private and public interest to such an extent that it raises concerns about 'revolving doors' in which privileged access to policy is secured by individuals who operate simultaneously in both sectors. Instead, it may have a positive effect in providing public sector people with more accurate knowledge about the third sector, and vice versa. For example, many of today's government and opposition politicians have the third sector as part of their life-work histories. There is an unusually large number of New Labour senior government ministers who have some kind of background in the voluntary sector (including Patricia Hewitt, Tessa Jowell and David Miliband), suggesting that an increasingly important function of the third sector is as a training ground or space for future political leaders, particularly within the social sectors. Knowledge about the third sector within government may therefore be higher than in previous governments because of this direct experience, although there is also plenty of evidence that lack of knowledge and distrust of the sector remains prominent among civil servants.

Civil service restructuring in recent years has begun to reduce the numbers of people employed in the public sector in the UK, leaving more people looking for work in other sectors. There is an exception within the field of international development, where increased government spending towards the United Nations international aid target of 0.7 per cent of GDP led to a spectacular expansion of the DFID under Labour up until 2005 (when DFID too became subject to public spending cuts), particularly in the areas of conflict and social development. Demand for new staff with appropriate expertise has inevitably led to a small 'brain drain' from the development NGO sector into DFID, as new entrants have found either temporary or long-term work within what has quickly become a very popular government agency.

The work-life histories throw light on the ways in which friendships and networks formed in early career persist over time and continue to inform the relationship between third sector and government in less visible ways. One of the most interesting examples of this is the role of what one informant termed 'ex-fams'. These are people who used to work for Oxfam GB, but who now hold

posts in government. Such people work as can operate as ‘boundary spanners’, oiling the relationship between government and third sector behind the scenes.¹¹ When Oxfam needs information about a particular issue from within the Foreign Office or DFID (where many such people are positioned), they can sometimes secure a privileged point of access and invoke some kind of ‘sector loyalty’.

Finally, the life-work histories illustrate the issue of the continuing separation of the ‘parallel worlds’ of domestic and international work in the UK third sector (Lewis, 1999). The accounts collected in the life histories help reveal the process through which people in the third sector tend to construct their work identities – either as UK-focused or internationally focused on the basis of their background (growing up with expatriate parents, for example, or coming from a minority ethnic community with strong roots overseas) or their own identity politics (such as a political view that it is arrogant to work in other people’s societies, or the belief that ‘charity begins at home’). The consequences of this separation between domestic and international work is a lack of learning and exchange between the two worlds, which also parallels separations between different parts of the public sector – each at odds with the more globalised perspectives that are needed to address local, national and international problems.

Individual level insights

This section moves on to the level of individual life histories and their trajectories. In relation to an individual’s motivation for boundary crossing, there are two main ‘archetypes’ that can be distinguished. The first is what can be termed ‘role-based identity’ in which a person’s priority is simply to follow the job, either at an activist level looking for a position for improved leverage in terms of bringing about change, or at the material level seeking better pay or conditions in the other – normally – public sector. For these people, there is no long-term concept of preferred sector as a chosen work space, or particular loyalty to the idea of a particular sector or its values.¹²

For example, one of the life-work histories was given by a female informant, now in her mid-50s, who is currently in a chief executive’s position in a large public sector organisation, having crossed over several times during her career. During her narrative, she talked about having developed for herself from an early age the idea of ‘trying to change the world through what you did’, and going in search of the places ‘that have got the levers to do that at any one time’. She worked through the 1970s as a community social worker for a radical local authority in London, and also as an activist in the trade union movement. She then moved to the third sector in 1979 after Thatcher came to power, arguing that the sector had now become ‘the place where I can do the stuff I want to do’. Working in a neighbourhood advice centre in North London, she was mainly engaged in what she termed ‘holding the local authority to account’ over community rights

and housing issues, by taking them to court. This person's subsequent career has included two other shifts across the boundary, including a spell as chief executive of a large national voluntary organisation in the social work field and another period as what she termed a 'real civil servant' in the Charity Commission. Resisting the simple generalisations and assumptions about the contrasting characteristics of the two, she sees the strengths and weaknesses of both sectors as largely contingent on broader politics, policy and organisational structure. An activist first and foremost, she has been frustrated by work experiences in both sectors at various points. Chiming with Little and Rochester (2003), she talked of how she found it difficult within the social services government bureaucracy to have to follow direction across all policy issues – 'getting behind whatever is coming out', even when it did not fit with one's own conviction. She also looks back on the frustrations when she was chief executive of the social work voluntary organisation with the third sector's overall lack of finance and sound governance. Instead, her career moves have been strongly determined by the specific opportunities she perceived within the wider context of politics and resources.

Another example of 'following the issue' is from the account of a mid-40s male who has worked as a long-time lobbyist within the development NGO sector, and who has focused mainly on the reform of international trade rules. He came into contact regularly with public officials at international trade negotiations and World Trade Organisation and European Union forums. After one particularly successful piece of advocacy to which he contributed made a direct impact on UK and, by extension, EU trade policy in favour of small farmers (and having 'publicly humiliated' a senior UK official in the process), he was soon afterwards invited by DFID to join two of its key departments – trade and international policy – where he took a secondment. The reason he accepted was that he was attracted by what he saw as the chance of 'going higher up the food chain' of policy influence, gaining access to what he expected would be more effective levers of potential power and opportunity to influence and promote positive change. Yet he was disappointed by the experience, despite a comparatively high level of remuneration. Finding himself unable to work within the politics and culture of a civil service environment, and being seen at times simply as 'an NGO canary' to test out the potential reaction of NGOs to DFID policy ideas (a marginal 'boundary spanning' position he was often able to exploit), he subsequently only stayed for a year. He turned down the offer of a more permanent job in what he saw as the 'alien environment' of DFID in favour of a return to the NGO world (but to a different organisation). He now looks back and sees that he was 'deeply unhappy' in the public sector, but that at the same time significant and useful knowledge was gained, and his 'NGO activist' identity was ultimately reinforced.

The process of 'following the issue', however, does not always mean that the importance of an idea of sector goes unrecognised. One informant who began

her very successful public career volunteering in the north of England in the early 1960s, and subsequently has risen to high public office in the legislature, speaks in her narrative of the importance of having operated ‘on the cusp’ of the third sector and the public sector throughout her career. Having worked in a range of public sector positions within the race relations board, the parole board, the civil service commission and a range of third sector organisations, she says that she has ‘an enormous experience and understanding of both sectors and therefore able to make a unique contribution’. By refusing to be tied down to one or other sector for very long she has developed a good knowledge of and contacts in both, and claims that this conscious strategy of ‘straddling’ has been a powerful tool for influencing change. This person’s narrative illustrates the importance of positioning and the idea that a form of power comes from being on the margins, where one can look both ways and be well informed about the wider landscapes of both public sector and third sector. Boundary crossing is therefore not only to be seen in terms of a sequence of movements backwards and forwards across the boundary, but also as the accumulation of a range of positions and networks from which to gain perspective.

The second is what can be termed ‘sector-based identity’, where an individual choice to make a move is guided primarily by a sense of belonging to, or identifying with, the third sector – but making an exploratory or experimental sojourn in the public sector in order to try to influence policy more effectively or learn useful lessons that can be taken back later to the sector. Such individuals tend to place a concept of ‘sector’ at the centre of their professional identity. For such people, their life/work history may contain accounts of disappointment that they were unable to gain the level of influence they had hoped (also a key finding from the Little and Rochester, 2003, study), or of rejection by public sector colleagues for not being ‘one of us’, or of being unable to deal with the alien culture of work in the bureaucracy. On the other hand, people who do not have this strong sense of sector are more likely to find their role inside government satisfying, as in the case of the informant who, after many years in the development NGO world, has gradually risen over four within the DFID hierarchy (in part also as a result of earlier networks built up through a long history of Labour Party membership and activism) to a position where he feels he does have both influence and job satisfaction:

I mean it was amazing, I was probably as a young relatively junior official, mid-career point I’d come into DFID, I was seeing more of the minister, I mean, on a sort of monthly basis putting up submissions . . .

Occasionally, such people may also experience a major change or experience – either as a gradual realisation or as sudden moment of epiphany – in which they see the third sector differently from their new vantage point, with its limitations brought into focus. One life-work history narrative that expresses this idea is

provided by a person – a male in his late 50s – who began his career in international development in the 1970s. He helped to establish a key research and campaigning organisation in London around the emerging theme of food aid and conflict, later moving into the formal NGO sector towards the end of the decade. At that time, informal relationships – resembling a class-based ‘old school tie’ type of network – between still quite informally organised NGOs and government officials in the Overseas Development Administration (as DFID was previously known) and the Foreign Office made it possible for him to work informally in discussion groups and networks with officials in discussing and shaping the new and suddenly pressing subject of food aid (made more urgent by the fact that Britain had recently joined the European Community and needed new ideas and strategies). These networks eventually led to him being given a job in the Foreign Office during the latter part of the Conservative government era. He found the culture of government initially difficult, but soon came to like the higher level of ‘rigour and directness of the discussion’, which he compared unfavourably with the far less structured way he was used to working in the NGO world. After a few years, he began to miss the hands-on management of working in the field. Rather than return to the NGO sector, which he saw as by this time having become excessively ‘professionalised’ (he has a particular dislike of what he terms the ‘blue chip NGOs’ that seek to ape the culture and practices of business companies), he chose to move instead to a position at the United Nations in the 1990s.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the case for the life-history method as a means of digging deeper into the everyday experiences and practices of activists and bureaucrats, whose ideas and actions help constitute the complex and shifting boundary between third sector and government. Life history can therefore be seen as a useful additional research method for social policy. The method can deepen understanding, challenge conventional assumptions, and counter-balance what Dhunpath sees as an increasingly problematic trend of over-reliance on ‘positivistic approaches [that] strip research of the rich tapestry of human experience and emotion’ (2000: 548), and construct over-generalised images of organisational actors and policy landscapes.

Yet it is also important to recognise that with life-history research the construction of the narrative remains a joint project between researcher and informant. In this case, my interest in the idea of boundary crossing was in part derived from my own earlier life-work history. My observations of boundary crossing in various contexts led me to place it at the centre of my research project, and as a result some level of contamination of the data may have taken place. For example, some informants were found to lack an explicitly ‘sectored’ perspective on their careers. But rather than limiting the scope of the research,

this refusal – in some cases – to attribute importance to ‘sector’ within a particular narrative led me to recognise and denote this absence by constructing a category of ‘non-sectored identity’. This turned out to be a useful finding, even though the category was not necessarily one that was acknowledged or shared by the informant.

What do the data tell us about changing sector boundaries in the UK? The movement of people between the third sector and public sector is an increasing component of the policy process in the UK. The life-work narratives lend credence to what Kendall (2003) calls a ‘contingent realist’ view of the third sector in the UK, highlighting its complexity and diversity. They underline the importance of studying the ways in which ‘the state’ – and, by extension, the third sector – operates and is manifested as ‘an idea’ as well as a set of structures and policies (cf. Abrams, 1981), and support views of the sector idea that avoid over-rigid conceptions of its boundary. Indeed, an undue emphasis on sector can draw attention away from more important matters within policy activities: ‘not so much the location of these activities – where they take place, in “sectoral” terms – but their content: what’s actually done, how and on what terms’ (Deakin, 2001: 26). The data lend support to the perspective of Evers (1995), who prefers the idea of an ‘intermediate area’ rather than a clear-cut sector, in which hybrid roles and identities are constructed by state, market and household.

The experiences of boundary-crossing individuals also provide insight into the way in which *ideas* about state and third sector operate within an era of flexible governance and contracted ‘partnership’. The life-work narratives challenge conventional and somewhat simplified views of ‘the NGO activist’ or ‘the government bureaucrat’. Such individuals are unique persons whose narratives, once constructed, require us to move on from the description of ‘discrete experience to an account of why and how the life took the shape it did’ (Dhunpath, 2000: 548). It examines the agency of such actors, rather than simply seeing them as part of a group whose identity can be assumed, whose performance can be measured in a straightforward way, or who can be acted upon or manipulated for specific purposes. The use of the method requires that events in an individual’s life-work history are analysed as part of a complex narrative whole, which in turn is embedded in a wider set of institutional stories and structural histories. Much can be learned from these boundary-crossers, whose ‘hybrid’ or ‘hyphenated’ professional identities are constructed from within what Benmayor and Skotnes (1994) term (in the context of migration) ‘in-between spaces’ in which plural identities reveal new perspectives on history and change.

There is therefore potential for building a more nuanced understanding of government/third sector relations in the UK by focusing on the career patterns, experiences and relationships of people who cross between the two. The particular value of the life-work history method is three-fold in that it: provides *perspective* in terms of creating a keyhole into institutional context and history; gives a

view of a *trajectory* of an individual career path that provides information about individual choice-making and transition; and offers rich *description* in the form of nuance and detail, as well as the emotion of lived identities and experience. These movements across the sectors in the UK reflect increased labour mobility, a new flexibility of governance actors and relationships, and changing perceptions of the nature of organising ‘spaces’ within the policy process. What makes life-history data different from, say, a conventional semi-structured interview on a particular theme is that in addition to the content of a person’s account, meaning is created through understanding the sequence of events within the full ‘trajectory’ of a particular life history.

The method leads us to challenge received wisdoms because it tells us not only about the details of people’s working lives but also about how these reinforce or contradict broader categories and values. As Godfrey and Richardson (2004: 145) put it, ‘oral testimony tells us as much about the symbolic categories through which reality is constructed as it does about the “facts” of people’s lives’. At the level of policy, many of the narratives serve to problematise one important area of symbolic category: the dominant three sector model of policy process and institutions. We see the ways in which existing sector theory fails to take sufficient account of the informal relationships that exist across the boundaries of the sectors and the nature of that boundary itself.

Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Nazneen Kanji and Nicholas Deakin for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this article, and for the valuable insights of three anonymous referees. I also wish to thank Hamish Arnott for his help. Most importantly, I wish to thank all my informants who gave so freely of their insights and time.
- 2 The ‘public sector’ is taken broadly to include local authorities, the civil service, central government and the various quasi non-governmental organisations that exist on the margins of the state. In the study, the ‘third sector’ is also broadly defined to include both formal and informal organisations and groups, often termed the ‘voluntary and community sector’ in UK. The term ‘third sector’ is preferred to other similar terms such as ‘civil society’, ‘voluntary sector’ and ‘non-profit sector’, because it is more neutral and less context-specific than these other labels (Lewis, 2007).
- 3 Although the boundary between the business sector and government is also important, the present study is concerned only with the third sector/government boundary.
- 4 Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, became independent from Pakistan after its war of liberation in 1971. Khan, who was originally from West Pakistan, made Pakistan his base in the 1980s.
- 5 Research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Grant Reference RES-155-25-0064 as part of its Non-Governmental Public Action (NGPA) Programme. The research project is a comparative one, which analyses boundary crossing in its diverse forms across four country contexts: the Philippines, Mexico, Bangladesh and the UK. This article draws only on data from the UK component of the research, and focuses on the use of the life-history method. A preliminary overview of comparative findings across the Bangladesh and Philippines contexts is available in Lewis (2008, forthcoming).

- 6 It was initially expected that several interviews would be conducted with each informant, but it was found that a longer continuous interview produced a stronger and more coherent narrative than several shorter ones. Once an interview had begun, informants often overran the time they initially promised and most said that they found the interviews quite satisfying to do. Clarifications and follow-up were normally possible later via email.
- 7 The principle of informed consent was followed as set out in the American Anthropological Association (AAA) guidelines. Informants were offered a copy of their transcript or recorded interview, although hardly any accepted. Anonymity of informants and organisations has been maintained in all publications arising from the research, unless such information under discussion was found to be already in the public domain, or judged to be at a level of generality that made it impossible to link with particular individuals. On the whole, the use of the life-history method was not found to raise responsibilities for the researcher that were any different or more complex than those arising from other forms of in-depth semi-structured interviewing.
- 8 The term 'cross-over' has become widely used in the Philippines to refer to individuals who have crossed from third sector into government. Finding it a useful shorthand, I have adopted it here, and I have extended it to include people who have moved in the other direction as well.
- 9 Such moves to and from the sector were not exclusively made by those on the political left, with close links also existing between the Conservative party and certain areas of the third sector.
- 10 See *New Statesman*, 13 March 2006.
- 11 The idea of 'boundary spanning' is used by organisation theorists to convey the idea of a person on the boundary who is 'representing the organisation or its interests to its environment' (Hatch, 1997: 93).
- 12 This distinction can also be analysed in relation to theories of 'work role transitions' (Nicholson, 1984). In this work, 'adjustment to transition' can be characterised either as 'role development', in which a person adapts by making changes in the organisational environment (and thereby playing a role in organisational change processes), or 'personal development', in which a person adjusts by altering their own values and identity and *absorbs* change.

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