

**Proposal for paper at the 25th ESREA Life History and Biography Network Conference
'Discourses we live by' (How) Do they benefit the world we live in?**

**Title: Where does freedom lie?: a dialogical exploration of the concept of biographicity
in relation to emancipatory social movements**

The paper will explore how we understand the concept of biographicity in relation to the practical and discursive activity of emancipatory social movements. The two authors of the paper have previously used the concept of biographicity (Alheit and Dausien, 2000) to analyse empirical research and found it a rich and generative concept. The authors have also been actively involved in social movements as participants and researchers. This has prompted us to ask how research on social movements can be used to supplement and develop the theory of biographicity.

To do this the paper will begin with a review of the main arguments offered by Alheit and Dausien (2000) and in particular examine how they understand the relationship between social change, agency and freedom. We will argue that Alheit and Dausiens' formulation remains one of the most substantive and provocative theories in the field. But we also discern some limitations and wish to take the opportunity provided by this conference to critically explore biographicity as one of the 'discourses we live by' as researchers. Part of the paper will explore how the theory is marked by the specific socio-historical and political context from which it emerged. In order to do this we will also situate the theory in the broader field of oral history, life history and biographical research as well as adult education literature (e.g Alheit, 1999; Plummer, 2000; Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 1982; Merrill & West, 2009; West, 2016). These critical reflections will also draw on empirical research (biographical accounts of students, an in-depth study of a community in struggle and a module on praxis and personal reflection with activists on a Master's course on education and social movements). On this basis we will argue that the conditions and dynamics of collective agency are somewhat overlooked in the theory of biographicity. Not only do we need to pay attention to the interplay between structures and agency but we need conceptual tools which allow us to map the relationship *between* individual and collective modes of agency and how this relates to practices and discourses of emancipation. In the final part of the paper we will outline some potential lines of development for this 'work in progress'.

Alheit, P. (1999). On a contradictory way to the 'learning society': A critical approach.

Studies in the Education of Adults, 31(1), 66-83..

Alheit, P. & Dausien, B. (2000). Biographicity as a basic resource of lifelong learning,. In J.

B. P. Alheit, E. Kammler, R. Taylor & H. S. Olesen (Eds.), *Lifelong learning inside*

and outside schools: Collected papers of the European conference on lifelong learning. (pp. 400-422). Roskilde: Roskilde University.

Merrill, B. and West, L. (2009) *Using biographical methods in social research*. Los Angeles; London: SAGE.

Plummer, K. (2000). *Documents of life 2: an invitation to a critical humanism*. London; Thousand Oaks, CA.:Sage.

Portelli, A. (1991). *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories*. New York: SUNY Press.

Thompson, P. (ed.) (1982) *Our common history: the transformation of Europe*. London: Pluto Press.

West, L. (2016). *Distress in the city: racism, fundamentalism and democratic education*. London: Books.