

Co-Present Biography: Understanding and Managing Stakeholder Differences to Improve Social Policy Outcomes

Contributors: David Lilley & Dallas Rogers & Peter Butler

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Co-Present Biography: Understanding and Managing Stakeholder Differences to Improve Social Policy Outcomes

Link to the Research Output

- Rogers, D., Lilley, D., & Butler, P. (in press). *The research-policy-praxis nexus: A dangerous liaison involving a housing practitioner, an academic and a tenant advocate*. Proceedings from 7th Australian Housing Researchers conference, Fremantle, Western Australia.

Co-present biography is a method for bringing together diverse perspectives on social policy issues and resolving and/or accommodating disagreement and conflict among social policy actors. We developed the method in response to a critical incident at an event in which the three of us were the lead presenters. We begin this case study by summarising the incident, and the process by which we used it to commence a new and exploratory way of working and researching together. This is followed by an overview of our research process, and our individual reflections upon it. We then discuss 'business as usual' approaches and the relationship between *co-present biography* and *collective biography* to emphasise what is distinctive about our method. We finish by providing an overview of co-present biography, including useful theoretical concepts, the purposes for which it can be used, scenarios to which it is suited and key elements of the method, to enable others to further develop and/or use it.

Learning Outcomes

This case provides an account of the development and application of co-present biography as a method for bringing together diverse perspectives on social policy issues

and resolving and/or accommodating disagreement and conflict among social policy actors. After reading this case, you will

- Have an understanding of the method, the context in which it was developed, the theory used in its development and how it might be used in practice
- Be able to identify the strengths and limitations of co-present biography
- Be able to identify scenarios in which co-present biography is likely to be useful
- Have a basic understanding of the theory that underpins co-present biography
- Be able to apply co-present biography to specific policy situations and issues

Background and Context – A Critical Incident

In June 2012, the Western Sydney Housing Coalition hosted a forum in Sydney, Australia, on community building and the redevelopment of public housing estates. We were approached separately and asked to deliver presentations consistent with our individual roles and perspectives. As we all knew each other prior to the forum, we communicated via email in the weeks leading up to the event. In particular, we agreed on the order of presentations and their general content.

David, a housing practitioner, would present first and provide an overview of the theory and practice of redeveloping social housing estates. Dallas, an urban policy academic, would present second, focusing on a critical assessment of international discourses associated with estate redevelopment. Peter, a tenant advocate, would speak third, giving a public housing tenant advocate perspective on redevelopment, as well as describing the experiences of public housing tenants. There would be time for a small number of questions following each presentation. A larger period of time was planned for the end of the session to allow the presenters to engage in discussion with the other presentations and with the audience.

While we all had some expectation of disagreement and debate on the day of the forum, the format appeared well suited to a productive discussion. However, the event was late to start, and our individual presentations were longer than originally planned. This resulted in the cancellation of the final discussion. This left the presenters and the audience frustrated that a number of issues that arose could not be critically analysed and discussed. Once the forum had officially closed, a number of confrontational arguments took place involving both the presenters and audience members.

In many ways, the forum had been a success. Important issues had been raised, and all present appeared to have a deep interest in them. This view was reflected by the forum's organisers, who emailed us the following message:

The Coalition was so fortunate to have the contributions of the presenters yesterday. We could hardly have found a better combination of speakers. I appreciate there were some tensions and difficult moments. I found these moments very pertinent to the content of the day and quite illuminating.

However, each of us walked away with a sense that we had been misunderstood, that we had been denied an opportunity to properly express our views, or respond to the views of others. Dallas spoke to Peter and David by phone and learnt that each was considering writing a reflective piece in response to the event. Dallas then proposed that we collectively work through the event and the issues it raised as a formal research project.

Agreeing to a Process and Tentative Method

Below is the content of the email in which Dallas invites David and Peter to participate in a collaborative research project:

I've had a quick chat with both of you about the idea of writing something about the session we did for the Western Sydney Housing

Coalition. Basically my idea is we could use a 'collective biography' method to explore the way the three of us – a practitioner, academic and resident – approach issues such as social mix and community building differently. The aim would not be to seek consensus, but instead to try to better understand each of our different viewpoints. We would need to avoid disagreeing or arguing with each other; so the aim is to hear what the other participants have to say and to attempt to understand their point of view.

'Collaborative biography' is a relatively new practice that allows people to share stories about a particular issue that is important to them. A small group meet once a month for about 6 sessions to discuss a topic by sharing and recording stories about an issue. Normally the group consists of people who share a 'similar' experience of an issue, but I think we could use it to explore a 'difference' of experience. The way you explore the issues is by telling real stories that capture the point you wish to make.

The general premise is that every story that is told to the group reminds the other group members of different stories. As the group progresses each of us will get to invite another person into the discussion (for one session) to tell a story to help us understand a particular viewpoint. Together, the stories will become a collective discussion about the diverse views of a practitioner, an academic and a resident around urban renewal. At the conclusion of the discussion, we will write-up the *collective biography* for publication outlining the process and observations about our different subjective positions.

What do you think, should we get together and discuss the idea?

A number of email exchanges then followed to confirm each participant's interest, identify an appropriate meeting location and develop a draft schedule of meetings. Dallas also circulated academic readings on the collective biography method, which included Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon's (2006) edited monograph *Doing Collective Biography*.

Dallas proposed that we engage an independent facilitator to assist us to actively manage conflict. We agreed to a preliminary meeting to set some ground rules and to agree on how we would apply the collective biography method, and discussed how to brief the proposed facilitator.

Our first meeting took place in a community meeting room on a public housing estate in South Western Sydney that was in the process of being redeveloped. While the building was managed by David's employer, and also contained a small number of offices, it was considered to be a relatively neutral location. It was a particularly appealing location to Peter as he does not own a car and it was relatively close to his home.

As the initiator of the meeting and a university employee, Dallas took on a coordinating role and organised ethics clearance for the project. We found that we were all interested in pursuing the project, although we also sensed that there was a level of underlying tension. This notwithstanding, we agreed not to engage an external facilitator, as this might have inhibited our openness and the method we sought to use. We had accepted that we needed to be intellectually and personally vulnerable if we were to properly grapple with the issues involved, and we felt that a facilitator would bring a level of formality to the discussions that might have allowed us to remain relatively locked into our original 'social roles'. Instead, we wanted to understand and to work through the tensions and difficulties ourselves. We had not yet introduced the theory that would later help us explain the conversations because the research employed an exploratory, rather than a hypothesis-driven, research methodology.

We agreed to have approximately six meetings together, which would be audio recorded and transcribed. We also agreed to audio record our own stories and to share these with each other as electronic audio files. The rationale behind this decision was that we could tell our stories and listen to, or read, each other's stories without interruption, both to better understand each other and to identify points of interest for discussion at our meetings. These stories were also transcribed. This reduced the amount of time needed for our face-to-face meetings and provided us with rich data for analysis later in the research process.

Finally, we also agreed on some ground rules. In summary, they focused on two very simple principles. First, our discussions would be confidential. We would not disclose

each other's stories or perspectives verbally or in writing without permission. All of us wanted to be able to speak freely, rather than defend institutional perspectives with which we might be seen to be aligned. We also wanted to avoid any concern that our words would be used against us, by each other or by those with whom the information might be shared. Second, we would not attack each other personally. Instead, we would respect each other, but in the tradition of philosophical critique and ethical discussion, we reserved the right to challenge each other's arguments and perspectives.

Meeting Together

Over a 6-month period, we met on five separate occasions and recorded two individual stories each. We audio recorded and transcribed our meetings and individual stories, resulting in a total of 11 transcripts.

Setting the Tone and Establishing Trust

We began the first meeting by reflecting on what had happened at the forum that led us to engage in this research process. In doing so, it became apparent that each of us had made assumptions about the others, and that these assumptions might turn out to be more complicated and nuanced than we had first thought. Two strong and interrelated examples of this were Peter's assumption that David agreed with all of the policies and decisions of the agency he worked for and Dallas' assumption that David's role was simply to implement government policy without question or discussion. Given the confidential nature of the conversation, David was able to explain what he did and did not agree with and outline his own position on a number of issues. He was also able to provide an 'insiders' account of the nature and relationship between policy and practice in the public service. In doing so, he provided a more nuanced understanding of the role and day-to-day activities of public servants. The above discussion quickly led to equivalent conversations about the role of academics in contemporary universities and the experiences, challenges and constraints that are placed on independent (unfunded) tenant advocates. This was an important starting point, because it cultivated a research

environment that humanised us as a group of co-researchers. This was distinct from a position of viewing each other as the 'positions' or 'social roles' that we occupy.

Data Collection: Topics Covered

After the first meeting, we agreed to each record a story that would help explain to the others how we came to occupy our current positions and to hold our current views. The basic premise was to capture and convey our 'lived experience' rather than simply rehearsing the common narratives that are frequently associated with our 'social roles'. For privacy and ethical reasons, we will not discuss the content of these stories here.

We did not pursue Dallas' earlier suggestion that each of us introduce a new member to the group to tell a story that would support our own position. While this may be beneficial for other studies, as we worked together, we felt that it was not necessary to justify our positions by enlisting the support of others. After the process of meeting together was underway, it was clear that this would have contradicted and interfered with the interpersonal dynamics that we established and fostered.

Data Analysis: Individual Reflections

We analysed the data that we had collected by collectively writing a reflective research paper for the Australasian Housing Researchers' Conference. This gave us a manuscript format and a research output. We decided that each of us would review the research transcripts and audio files and write approximately 1000 words on the process we had been through together, and the emerging themes. This was initially a parallel process of thematic analysis and reflection, brought together through discussion and co-editing. As the conference paper would be the first research output that we had written together, this approach was a methodological safeguard to ensure that all three voices were heard and included in the research paper. If one person had written the draft document, it would have felt (and presumably would have been) less authentic as a collaborative research output. To emphasise the importance of this approach, we have provided extracts from our individual 'thought pieces' below:

David:

It is often not possible for a public servant to engage in open and honest conversation with 'adversaries', due to the possibility that any concession or slip of the tongue will be recorded and used to win a later argument, or possibly to punish. This has not been my experience in this project. We have been able to share personal thoughts, discuss ethical dilemmas and debate practical issues in an environment of mutual trust and respect. I am confident that this has led to new insights for all of us, and I am also confident that we have each changed our views on at least some of the matters discussed. I think it is fair to say that all of us have benefited from the project and would like to continue our conversation in some form for the foreseeable future. However, it also should be noted that there was never any intention that we would work together in terms of our substantive roles. Rather, the intention was to explore what we can learn from each other, both to use this insight in our own lives and roles, and to contribute what we learn to others (both via our day-to-day practices and via seminars, conferences and papers).

Dallas:

David's boundaries are such that he has to work *within* the policy arena that is shaped by policy frameworks and political discourse. Dallas does not have to conform to the state's politico-institutional system in the same way, for his boundaries are such that he can work *outside* the dominant policy frameworks. However, he too is not completely free to choose where to draw his subjective boundaries, instead they are constrained and shaped by the coordinates of an academe-institutional setting and the discourses of social science research. While Peter's boundaries are different again, his socio-institutional coordinates mean that he is neither confined nor formally allowed access to the politico- and academe-institutional coordinates that partly bind David and Dallas respectively. Peter's socio-institutional coordinates locate him, in both a

social and physical sense, to a specific group of people; public housing tenants in Western Sydney.

Peter:

Dallas, David and I have known each other for a long while, going back to the start of the redevelopment of Minto Public Housing Estate in 2000/2001. But because of our different positions, we were expecting to find significant differences in our perspectives on this development. While this largely did happen, we were each surprised to find that there were also some quite strong underlying similarities between us as well; in particular, an interest in working with and understanding disadvantaged communities, and improving their living conditions and life opportunities. So this discovery was the first thing that struck us about this process. Of course, important differences do exist, which I'll discuss shortly. Perhaps it is not surprising, upon reflection, that because of similar concerns we'd end up in the same place, but at the same time we need to understand our differences as well. So there are two sides to this coin, and I'll give an example of each. Dallas has given some details of his practical and academic involvement with disadvantaged groups, including public housing development projects in Bonnyrigg and Minto; and David describes some of the initiatives and discussions he undertook behind the scenes with the Minto redevelopment, in order to give more say to tenants in the process – efforts that were not required as part of his job, but which he undertook after listening to residents' concerns. Part of his motivation, which he brought out in our discussion of Freire, was that residents should not be 'dehumanized' as a result of oppression. So in responding to their concerns, he was attempting to acknowledge their power in the process and include that in decisions made.

Comparison to ‘Business as Usual’

To illustrate what is unusual in our approach, it is necessary to consider how individuals and organisations with different backgrounds, perspectives and roles usually come together to deal with community development and estate redevelopment issues. An excellent example of this is the Minto Renewal Project referred to earlier.

In 2002, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Housing announced the redevelopment of the Minto Public Housing Estate over a period of approximately 15 years. A Community Reference Group was formed to include stakeholders in planning and implementation. However, this quickly descended into a combative relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’, with each side focused on what they were trying to achieve, rather than on reaching any sort of common understanding. This group was also perceived to be ‘the Department’s group’, with the result that local residents and stakeholders felt the need to form their own Resident Action Group that would forcefully advocate for the interests of the local community. This included numerous representations to the NSW Minister for Housing and other politicians and bodies, to attempt to have the project discontinued or substantially changed.

This approach continued when the Department of Housing sought to develop an interagency and community social plan for the project, referred to locally as Working Together in Minto. A largely independent Coordination Group was formed, with a large budget and substantial autonomy in decision-making. Despite this, an antagonistic relationship remained for a number of years. This got in the way of the collaboration that was intended, and slowed down both planning and implementation. The outcomes achieved were thus suboptimal, despite strong commitment from all involved.

A New Method?

In reviewing the process we had been through, we formed the view that we had not deployed a collective biography methodology, as our objectives and approach varied substantially. To begin with, the collective biography method described by Davies and Gannon is an explicitly feminist approach. It is not concerned with generating

knowledge about individuals, but with analysing the processes and influences that shape individuals, and with disrupting discourses about women. In contrast, we maintained a focus on each other as individuals throughout our work. In seeking to understand each other, we each described how we came to occupy our current positions, and how our views were formed, but we did not seek to generalise from these to the experiences of men or to people who held positions similar to our own. Similarly, we did not seek to interrogate each other's experiences, but accepted their influence and meaning as described by the speaker. Our goal was not to generalise, theorise or disrupt, but to understand each other as individual *selves*, to find ways of working together that accepted difference, to explore how our insights might be useful for others working on social housing and to explore methodological implications.

Given that we started out using collective biography as a basis for our work, it is important to explain the relationship between this method and our own. In their introductory chapter, Davies and Gannon describe the practices of collective biography under a series of subheadings. We have adopted the same subheadings here to explain the similarities and differences between our approaches. Furthermore, any attempt to deploy a co-biography research method might also begin with reading about collective biography.

Selecting the Group to Work on the Project

Collective biography participants are feminist academics or research students who share common academic interests and perspectives. They must commit to preparatory work, attending a series of workshops, and to the process of collective writing beyond the workshop.

While our *co-present biography* began with a common interest in the theory and practice of public housing estate redevelopment, we came from substantially different social positions and perspectives. We sought to use the process we engaged in to identify and work constructively with conflict, not to develop shared understanding. The commitment and preparatory work required was similar to collective biography.

Selecting the Topic

In a collective biography project, a specific topic is selected for investigation from within the field of feminist memory/biographical work.

In contrast, our research method was developed in response to a critical incident, the awareness of difference the incident gave us and the potential benefits of collaborative research that we identified.

Structuring the Workshop

Collective biography workshops often take place in conjunction with academic conferences, as conferences tend to bring together the relevant participants. Workshops usually go for a number of hours at a time, and participants are brought together on a number of days in close succession. The first couple of hours are usually spent on introducing participants and discussing the topics that will be discussed.

Our co-present biography process was established in our first 2-h meeting when we discussed and clarified the ground rules. We aimed to meet on a fortnightly basis. This provided us with time to 'mull over' our conversations between meetings, to record new stories and to listen to each other's stories for inspiration.

Memory-telling

Participants in collective biography describe memories to each other related to a set topic. They use each other's memories to in and provoke additional memories of their own. After various iterations, this enables them to describe a form of shared or collective memory of what it has been like to be a girl/woman in the world.

Our co-present biography use of stories was much more pragmatic. We shared stories to explain something about our formative experiences and ourselves without any expectation that the other participants would share them. The aim was to present an

unknown story to our co-present biographers – not to present them with a story of familiarity.

Memory-writing

After participants in collective biography have told stories, listened to stories and questioned the other storytellers, they separate and write down one or two of their memories that relate to the collective story(ies) that are emerging. Their intention in doing this is to capture what the experience felt like, not to describe the experience in a technically correct or linear fashion.

Our co-present biography storytelling tended to be more removed from the meetings we held. We recorded stories in our own homes on voice recorders. These were shared in the group meetings, but our co-present biographers also listened to these stories in private. Our stories remained distinctly our own.

Reading Stories

According to Davies and Gannon (2006), participants in collective biography read and rewrite their stories over a number of sessions, aiming to ‘open up spaces in which our stories become not merely autobiographical, but are the means to make visible the discursive processes in which we each have been collectively caught up’ (pp. 10–11).

Again, in our co-present biography process, we read each other's stories to understand differences in our experiences, our roles and our selves. We did not seek to retell or refine our stories, but to explore their significance to the storyteller and to better understand the storyteller.

The Basics of the Co-Present Biography Method

We eventually settled on the name *co-present biography* to describe the method we developed as this seemed to do justice to our approach and the theory we had been discussing. We were deeply interested in each other's biographies, but we did not seek commonality of experience. Rather, we were co-present as individuals with individual biographies while recognising our common humanness and our shared interest improving public housing.

We found the co-present biography method to be very useful and informative. We now understand each other much better than we did, we have a broader and more insightful understanding of the stakeholders and issues involved in the renewal of public housing estates, and we are more aware of our own biographical influences and our present selves.

To assist others to understand and apply the method, whether as we have or in a modified form, we provide a short overview of what we believe to be its central elements below. This includes useful theoretical concepts, the reasons for using the method, the sorts of scenarios in which the method is likely to add value and the key elements of the method.

Useful Theoretical Concepts

Active and Passive Conformity

The political scientist Murray Edelman makes an important distinction between two forms of organisational conformity. Active conformity is concerned with conscious attempts by an individual to align their language and practices with those of the organisation with which they are associated. This may be to gain a sense of solidarity with one's peers, to gain a promotion and so on. Passive conformity occurs when

the individual subconsciously or unconsciously adopts language and practices of the organisation, that is, when speaking and acting in particular ways becomes a habit or 'second nature'.

We all found the co-present biographical method helpful in identifying conformity in ourselves. The act of engaging with differently positioned individuals challenged us to think deeply about the origins of our views, and this was aided by making the conceptual distinction between the active and passive forms of conformity.

Activism

Activism describes the efforts of those who lobby for changes to a policy, approach or organisation. Such action is usually thought to come from 'outsiders'. In our work, we discovered that each of us engaged in activism, albeit via substantially different methods. Anna Yeatman's edited collection *Activism and the Policy Process* assisted us to grapple with the different forms activism can take and to articulate some of the similarities and differences between our respective approaches.

Agency and Structure

Agency refers to an individual's capacity to act of their own volition, while structure refers to the constraining or enabling conditions of the individual's environment. Some authors favour either agency or structure, arguing that structures can be understood by understanding agents, or that agents are little more than the products of particular structures. We found it to be important to make a conceptual distinction between agency and structure, that is, to consider them to be distinct phenomena, as argued for by the sociologist Margaret Archer. This was invaluable in thinking about the three of us as different agents with different relationships to different social structures.

Democracy

We found ourselves talking at length about democracy and democratic institutions, in particular the relationship between citizens and the different arms of government, and the role of public servants. We strongly suggest participants in co-present biography exercises agree to read and discuss a particular text on this subject, such as Chantal Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox* or Iris Marion Young's *Inclusion and Democracy*.

Dialogue

Martin Buber describes dialogue as being a balance between standing your own ground and being profoundly open to the other. This very much sums up what we were trying to achieve in our meetings. We were not there to conform to any sort of group ideal. We wanted to understand each other better, we were open to change, but we also needed to speak with a level of conviction, both for the purpose of personal integrity and because it would not be possible for our fellow participants to understand us if we were not reasonably firm and clear. This is of course a balancing act that must be worked out on a case-by-case basis.

Humanness

During the process of working together, David and Peter discovered a common admiration for *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire, who argues that it is people's vocation to be human, that is, to be free from oppression and to think and act for themselves. It is our humanity that we have in common, and it is important that we respect each other's humanness. The three of us agreed to read this book over the 2012–2013 Christmas holiday period, and then use one of our meetings to discuss the text and its relevance to us as individuals and to our work together.

Agonistic Pluralism

One of the struggles we encountered in our work was with what the *collective* in *collective biography* meant. While we were interested in working together, we did not have any real intention of emerging from the process with a single view. We had good reasons for coming together, but forming a homogeneous collective was not one of them.

In *The Democratic Paradox*, Chantal Mouffe makes an important distinction between antagonism and agonistic pluralism. Antagonism takes place between enemies who have no interest in working together. In agonistic pluralism, enemies are replaced by adversaries or 'friendly enemies', who find ways to co-exist and even to take advantage from the competition of different ideas. We felt that this sat well with our group activity, as well as with our more formal (and at times competitive) roles.

Doing Co-present Biography

Co-present biography can be used

- to improve participants' understanding of complex policy issues and the perspectives of various stakeholders,
- to improve participants' working relationships,
- to improve participants' ability to resolve or accommodate tensions and conflicts,
- to improve collaboration.

Scenarios suited to the use of co-present biography include the following:

- the participants are committed to achieving positive social change.
- the participants (and their work) would benefit from greater insight into each other's perspectives.
- the participants have a desire to work at an intersubjective level.
- the participants are comfortable reading academic-style material.

- the participants have sufficient trust in each other to discuss personal experiences and perspectives.
- the participants can commit sufficient time to working through the co-present biographical method.

Key elements of co-present biography are as follows:

- identify the topic or topic area
- identify the participants (can take place before or after the identification of the topic)
- set rules
- develop a meeting schedule
- identify key texts to read individually and discuss collectively (this can take place before and/or during the process of meeting)
- audio record individual stories
- meet to discuss the topic and individually recorded stories (meetings also audio recorded)
- have audio recordings transcribed if possible (preferably immediately after each meeting, to enable participants to refer to the transcripts)
- engage in shared writing processes

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- We developed co-present biography in response to a 'critical incident'. Can you think of similar incidents from your own practice, or from policy issues discussed in academic journals or the media? What were the results of the incident, and how might co-present biography have led to a different outcome?
- Considering Martin Buber's understanding of dialogue as being a balance between standing your own ground and being profoundly open to the other, what do you think is the place of dialogue in social policy?
- We drew on a number of theories in developing and applying co-present biography. What other theory might be useful, and what are the implications of this theory for the method we have described?

- We claim that co-present biography is a new and distinct method. Do you agree, or do you consider it to be a different way of applying collective biography?

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