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USING BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE METHODS AND LIFE STORY
METHODS TO RESEARCH WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS: FEMCIT

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Section 1

Using Biographical Narrative and Life Story Methods to Research Women's Movements: FEMCIT

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Amongst the variety of research methods employed within FEMCIT as a whole, the *intimate citizenship* work package chose to use biographical narrative methods to tackle our specific primary research question: *how has intimate life changed in the wake of the cultural and political interventions of recent women's movements, and what are the experiences of intimate citizenship of those most distanced from the male-breadwinner model of intimate life against which second wave feminism set itself?*¹ In this paper I explain the thinking behind the decision to use a biographical narrative approach in this part of FEMCIT, and I discuss the particular method we used.

A number of leading sociologists have asserted that the post 1960s women's movement has been a key driver in the "transformation of intimacy" (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Castells, 1997; Weeks, 2007). Their work suggests that processes of individualization, detraditionalization and increased self-reflexivity are fundamentally linked to feminist projects, and have opened up new possibilities and expectations in personal relationships and family life. However, none have carried out empirical analyses that investigate the processes of influence by which this might have happened, or that scrutinized their claims. The *intimate citizenship* sub-project within FEMCIT sought to put this argument to the test.

We wanted to understand the role women's movements might have had in transforming intimate citizenship both as law and policy, and as everyday lived experience. The first phase of the research was to carry out an historical mapping of the demands and actions of social movements in relation to intimate life between 1968 and 2008. This was followed by an analysis of law and policy in relation to intimate life across the same period, in which we sought to identify evidence of movement claims feeding into public debate, influencing the policy process and being enacted in law and policy. The final stage of the research was to carry out a biographical narrative study of "intimate lives at the cutting edge of change".

Rather than studying the changes wrought in the intimate lives of women's movement activists, as Sisterhood and After is doing², the focus was on "ordinary people", women and men who are living outside conventional couples and families. We wanted to explore the extent to which, and the ways in which, "unconventionality" in intimate life might (or might not) be related to the cultural and political shifts set in train by women's movements. So, we interviewed people who were single, living in shared housing, lesbian/ gay/ in a same-sex relationship, and/ or in a non-cohabiting ("living apart together") relationship. The idea behind this form of strategic sampling was to deliberately select cases that were as favourable as possible to the thesis that women's movements have contributed to the transformation of lived experiences of intimate citizenship.³ In the, often arduous, process of finding interviewees, we deliberately did not recruit interviewees through political networks, women's groups or feminist organizations, in order to strengthen our ability to comment upon the ways in which feminist ideas, claims and demands, and the legal and policy changes they have brought about, have influenced the intimate lives of "ordinary people". The sample was

further specified to include both members of national majority populations, and of two minoritized/ racialized groups from each of the four countries in the study, and we also decided to focus on people in the age group which is most normatively expected to be coupled, thus interviewing people aged between 28 and 54.⁴ In total we carried out 67 interviews across the four countries. Our sample certainly cannot claim to be representative of any of the groups of which it is comprised, but seeking to understand socio-biographical complexity and particularity, rather than representativeness, was our aim.

The research was carried out using the “biographical narrative interpretive method” (BNIM) (Breckner and Rupp, 2002; Wengraf, 2009), which is a qualitative psychosocial methodology, drawing on the German tradition of in-depth hermeneutics and the long, but rather marginalized, history of sociological research on biographical experience. We used this method, rather than the more conventional sociological approach of semi-structured qualitative interviews, because of its orientation to the exploration of life histories, lived situations and personal meanings in their socio-historical context, and its attention to the complexity and specificity of lived experience and to “historically situated subjectivity” (Wengraf, 2009). BNIM enables, and indeed requires, the researcher to focus on both the individual and particular in biography and personal meaning, *and* on wider socio-cultural processes and historical contexts. The method assumes that narratives are expressive of both the conscious concerns of interviewees, and of unconscious personal and socio-cultural assumptions and processes. It seeks narratives of past experience, rather than self-conscious statements of current belief and discourse about present and past experience, allowing the interviewee to “wander in and out of recovered memories, in particular those that are seemingly trivial” (Bollas, 1995: 138 quoted in Wengraf, 2009:37).

Our BNIM interview hinged on a single question that is designed to elicit narrative from the interviewee: ***“Can you tell me the story of your life and personal relationships – all the events and experiences that have been important to you personally, how it has been for you? Please begin wherever you like”***. The interviewee was offered the floor to tell their story in their own way, without interruption or guidance from the interviewer. The method requires the interviewer to abstain from interrupting, and to offer the interviewee a sense of open-ended space within which to speak. During the interviewee’s response to the question, the interviewer would take notes about the topics discussed by the interviewee, paying particular attention to the sequence in which topics are raised and the language used by the interviewee. Then, after the interviewee had exhausted what they had to say, and had been prompted for more, the interviewer followed this up with further questions about the events and experiences that had been recounted, asking for more narrative detail and seeking to draw out narratives of particular incidents (“pushing for PINs” in BNIM terminology – PINs being “particular incident narratives”). The questions followed the sequence of topics raised by the interviewee in their initial answer, and used the interviewee’s own words. The method therefore differs from a semi-structured interview where a pre-set list of questions or themes guides the interview. The interviewees decided for themselves what to speak about, and we only asked for more detail about events and experiences that they themselves first discussed. This means that we did not explicitly elicit information about attitudes and orientations towards the issues focused on by women’s movements. We found this approach produced rich, complex narratives, and contrary to our concern before we started interviewing, it worked well with people across classes and educational backgrounds and from different racialized/ minoritized groups: it wasn’t just a method suited to those who were used to telling their story. A small number of interviews were of about an hour, a few were well over 4 hours, with the majority taking between 2 and 3 hours.

The first stage of analysis that we carried out of the data thus gathered involved a “twin track” process, focusing first on the “lived life” (the biographical “facts” recounted in the interview), and then on the “told story” of intimate life (the narrative), and finally the relationship between the two. We chose 20 interviewees as detailed case studies; each of these had three data analysis workshops dedicated to them, involving the research team and a number of external researchers.⁵ The remaining cases were subject to a less intensive, but similar, process of analysis, and we wrote up case studies of all 67 interviews, which will serve as a resource for future analysis and writing. The second stage of analysis addressed our central question about the influence of women’s movements on intimate citizenship. This involved working inductively across the whole set of individual case studies, immersed in the detail of the cases, and looking for patterns and themes, first to analyse the narratives of intimate citizenship offered by each interviewee, and second, to analyse the overall impact of the movements on the experiences of intimate citizenship of each interviewee.

In analysing interviewees’ narratives of intimate citizenship we were not focusing *directly* on the question of the impact of movements for gender and sexual equality; rather we were following the subjective constructions of our interviewees, their own representations of their experiences of intimate citizenship. However, some of the narrative categories offer clear evidence of the lack of impact of women’s movements, whilst others point to the complex enmeshment of movement impacts with other processes of social and cultural change. To summarise our findings, which are explored elsewhere (Roseneil et al, 2012), we found five main narratives of intimate citizenship amongst our interviewees: narratives of oppression; conventional narratives; narratives of self-realization/ authenticity; narratives of struggle; and narratives of unfulfilment/ failure.

The other major strand of analysis focused on exploring the difference made by movements for gender and sexual equality and change to our interviewees’ intimate lives and experiences of intimate citizenship. Here we brought our biographical narrative case studies of individuals’ experiences into dialogue with the historical analysis we had carried out of women’s movements’ claims and demands relating to intimate citizenship (see Roseneil et al, 2011), and the policy analysis we had conducted in which we traced changes in law and policy around intimate citizenship in each of the four countries. Across the set of case studies, we looked for evidence of the role that legal and policy changes resulting from the claims and demands of women’s movements might have played in interviewees’ intimate lives, such the extension of reproductive rights, changes in the law around sexual and intimate partner violence, and women’s increased economic independence. We also sought evidence of the impact of discourses and ideas about feminism, gender and sexual equality, lesbian and gay rights, and sexual liberation, either directly or more diffusely through mediated cultures, in interviewees’ lived intimate lives and in their told stories. On the basis of this, we were able to cluster our interviewees into three groups: *no discernable impact* – where impact of the movements was not discernable (12 interviewees); *clear impact* – where there was clear, direct evidence of impact of legal/ policy changes/ cultural transformations related to the movements (41 interviewees); and *traces of impact* – where there was less definite evidence of impact, often indirect, through the lives of others who have been impacted or via wider cultural shifts in gender and sexual identities and relations (14 interviewees).

The biographical narrative method was only one of many methods used within FEMCIT as a whole; the wider research team also carried out semi-structured interviews and focus groups with “ordinary people”, “expert interviews” with women’s movement activists and NGO

workers, policy makers and politicians, surveys, participant observation, discourse and mapping analysis of policy documents, parliamentary debates, media and women's movement texts, and secondary analysis of statistical data (see Halsaa, Roseneil and Sumer, 2011). This multi-method approach was vital in attempting to understand the range of ways in which women's movements have impacted upon the different aspects of gendered citizenship with which we were concerned, but the focus on biographies and narratives was particularly appropriate and generative for researching intimate life and citizenship.

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¹ The Intimate Citizenship research team comprised Sasha Roseneil (work package leader), Isabel Crowhurst (UK), Tone Hellesund (Norway), Ana Cristina Santos (Portugal) and Mariya Stoilova (Bulgaria).

² For discussion of the impact of involvement in the women's peace movement on participants' personal lives see Roseneil (1995; 2000).

³ Flyvberg (2006) argues that this Popperian type of "falsification" approach to sample selection contributes to the rigor and generalizability of case study research, because if a sample that is likely to confirm a hypothesis actually fails to do so, then the hypothesis can be seen to fall. A future study might focus on people who might be thought to be *least likely* to evidence the influences of women's movements in their intimate lives – such as those who marry and have children young, or male-breadwinner/ female-homemaker couples.

⁴ The chosen countries differ in terms of contemporary and historical welfare and gender regimes, state/ market relations, and patterns of migration: a post-communist country (Bulgaria); a Nordic "woman-friendly" (Hernes, 1987) social democratic welfare state (Norway); a southern European welfare state that has relatively recently transitioned from dictatorship to democracy (Portugal); and a (neo)liberal democratic welfare state. We interviewed Roma and Turkish minorities in Bulgaria, Pakistani and Sami minorities in Norway, Cape Verdeans and Roma in Portugal and Pakistani and Turkish-speaking minorities in the United Kingdom. For further discussion of the sample see Roseneil et al (2012).

⁵ These workshops were conducted in English, although the interviews had been carried out by in Bulgarian, Norwegian, Portuguese and English. The researchers translated the interviews for the workshops.