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The Memoir Method in Educational Research From an Australian Perspective

Abstract This paper reviews some key memoir studies, which were carried out in South Australia, and considers their process of data collection and analysis. A second aim is to explore the current status and usefulness of Znaniecki's memoir approach in contemporary educational research. Smolicz followed Znaniecki in emphasizing the need to accept social and cultural values and actions as facts, just as human agents themselves accept them. Every individual was seen as a member of various group social systems and interpreted as a center of experience and actions based on the cultures of those groups. Smolicz also adopted Znaniecki's memoir method of collecting and analyzing personal data in order to understand the actions and attitudes of young people of immigrant families and their educational experiences in Australian schools. These conscious human agents played an important role in maintaining and changing their group's cultural systems. This paper highlights examples of various forms of memoirs collected from four different studies focused specifically on the issue of cultural identity. The comments of the participants, who came from various minority ethnic groups living in Australia, illustrate the nature of the comments made, as well as the researchers' analysis and findings. The research studies of Smolicz and his associates demonstrate that memoir method has an important place in understanding the culture of different groups, which can be applied in many contexts – global, ethnic, national, and local.

Keywords Humanistic Sociology; Memoir Method; Cultural Identity; Ethnic; Australian Perspective

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This paper discusses the application of the memoir method of research, developed originally by Florian Znaniecki and his colleagues in the early part of the twentieth century, to subsequent social scientific research in Australia. Memoir method has been employed in a number of ways for educational research in the South Australian context,

ever since it was introduced by Jerzy Smolicz over 30 years ago. In the course of his research with students and colleagues in the School of Education at the University of Adelaide, Smolicz adapted the method, as well as the humanistic sociological theory used to interpret the data, in order to fit the context and context of his investigations. Many of these were focused on the cultural activation and attitudes of young people from immigrant families from a range of ethnic backgrounds, as they were being educated in Australian schools. On the basis of this research experience, Smolicz elaborated a specific model of memoir analysis. This paper discusses examples of these memoir-based studies, including the most recent investigation of young people's participation in sport, as it related to their sense of cultural identity.

The Concepts of Humanistic Sociology

The memoir method has been developed as part of a conceptual framework called humanistic sociology (Znaniecki 1969; Smolicz and Secombe 2000) which has a strong anti-positivistic approach towards the study of society. It links the study of the social and the cultural by seeing culture as made up of the shared meanings (or cultural values) which members of a particular social group create, maintain, and modify as the basis of the things that they do together. A fundamental principle of the whole theory of humanistic sociology is that cultural values and individuals' attitudes to them must be taken as facts in their own right, and looked at in the way that individuals, viewed as active social agents, themselves identify and acknowledge them (Znaniecki 1963; Chałasiński 1982).

Smolicz (1979) considered that Znaniecki's humanistic sociological concepts and memoir method were well suited for investigating how individuals of different ethnic communities, as well as those of the Anglo-Celtic majority, viewed the reality of cultural and linguistic diversity in Australia and what it meant to them personally. It was an approach that could lead to understanding individuals' feelings and aspirations towards English and mainstream culture, on the one hand, and what Clyne (2005) called Australian community languages and cultures, on the other.

In the context of research on cultural diversity in Australia, humanistic sociological theory was further elaborated by Smolicz (1979), who contended that all human beings are active agents in a particular group, and their participation defined the group's culture. However, to become active members and be recognized among other group members, individuals have to learn the shared meanings or cultural values which make up the group's culture. The group members' own thoughts, expressions, and behaviors are then influenced by the group's values.

When an object, word, or person's action has a meaning in the group's life, in addition to its concrete existence in the natural world, Znaniecki (1969) called it a "cultural value." Most often a particular cultural value is linked to others like it in a group system. For example, words are part of the linguistic system of a particular language. People in relation to one another form a group system of social values, which in Smolicz's work was extended to include two: primary for close, intimate relationships and secondary for more formal, official, or distant ones. The system

of sporting values relates to various meanings given to sport. In the area of sporting values, it is possible to think of more specific group systems – of soccer, volleyball, swimming, cricket, or netball values, where cultural meanings are given to the equipment and space used, the rules of the game, the various players and their particular actions, allowed and not allowed (Maniam and Mathews 2012).

Smolicz (1979) developed the specific term “personal cultural system” for the systems of cultural values which individuals construct for their own use, based on those meanings they have learned from their participation in the group’s activities. The group’s shared meanings, which develop from one generation to the next, are sustained and changed as individuals actively participate in the essential interplay between the members of the group as individual persons and the life and activities of the group as a whole (Secombe and Zajda 1999).

To understand these cultural phenomena, Smolicz and his colleagues followed Znaniecki in applying the humanistic coefficient to their investigations. Every social and cultural activity was to be understood and interpreted from the participant’s point of view and not from the perspective of the researcher who was studying the cultural phenomenon (Smolicz and Secombe 1981). The application of the humanistic coefficient put the focus on the motives and experiences of individual agents, and their consciousness of themselves in their cultural situation and social roles (Znaniecki 1963; 1969).

The issue for young people of immigrant parents in Australia was that they participated in the life

of two different groups, the home and the school, and had to learn the culture of both (Marjoribanks 2002). Thus, it was important for the Australian researchers to understand what actions such as speaking the home language with parents, celebrating a religious festival, doing well at school, or marrying a member of another ethnic group meant to the young people concerned and their family members. Specific examples of cultural actions related to playing sports are serving an ace in tennis, taking a penalty in football, crossing the finishing line in a marathon, hitting a boundary in cricket, and shooting a goal in basketball (Krawczyk 1970). Each of these actions is what it is in the experience of the player; the game concerned is interpreted in terms of the shared cultural meanings which make it possible for the particular sport to be played (Krawczyk 1970; 1980).

The Memoir Method in South Australia

The meanings shared by a group of participants were investigated through what Znaniecki (1968) called “cultural data,” where the participants are asked to explain their experience and comment on their thoughts, feelings, and actions in their own words (Secombe 1997). Such data are different from natural data which are derived from direct observation or questionnaire responses which can be measured and counted quantitatively. In the case of cultural data, researchers can study a cultural item by tapping into individuals’ comments on their participation of experiences in it. From cultural data, interpreted through the humanistic coefficient from the participants’ perspective, the researcher can find evidence of cultural meanings or values which

make up individuals’ personal cultural systems (Smolicz 1994; Secombe and Zajda 1999).

Znaniecki’s development of the memoir method had come through the collection of personal documents that already existed – family letters, diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies written by Polish people who had left their homeland to settle in Europe and the U.S.A. (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). Subsequently, he and his associates initiated the process of asking individuals to write a full memoir, reflecting on their life experience (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927; Chałasiński 1938; 1984). Later research studies modified the method by asking individuals to write on much more limited topics, such as the inhabitants of Poznan writing down their thoughts and feelings about their city (Znaniecki 1969) or Solidarity strikers from the Gdansk shipyards writing about their 1981 experiences (Smolicz et al. 2010).

In addition, the technique of an oral memoir was developed as an alternative method where memoirs are personal statements. This involved the transcription of a taped interview based on extensive open-ended questions. This approach proved effective in providing worth-while personal data in much the same way as a written memoir. Kłoskowska (2001) used the oral memoir technique for her investigation of cultural valence and national identification among young people studying at Polish universities.

Smolicz and his colleagues in Adelaide adopted the method of written or oral memoirs, but with some modifications. Participants were asked to write (or speak) about those aspects of their lives and experiences in which the researcher was interested rath-

er than provide their whole life history. In those studies, which used secondary school students as respondents, personal statements were written in response to open-ended guideline questions, which suggested a topic to be discussed but left students free to respond in their own ways (Marjoribanks 2002; Smolicz 2002).

It is important to draw a distinction between memoirs or personal documents which already exist, like family letters, diaries, or personally initiated memoirs, and those which are written at the request of researchers. Pre-existing documents, which have been written to fulfill some earlier social or cultural purpose, are quite independent of the researchers in terms of their content and form. Where researchers initiate the collection of personal data, specifically for the purpose of research, they are clearly in a position to influence what the participants discuss, and even how they frame their responses.

The Adelaide researchers followed the principles of humanistic sociology, sought consciously to minimize their influence on the way participants discussed the topic under investigation, and left them free to decide what aspects they wrote or spoke about, what attitudes they discussed, and what thoughts and feelings they described. In suggesting a topic to participants, or in providing more explicit guideline questions, the researchers used an open-ended approach, as well as a neutral tone, which provided no indication of any particular answer being expected by the researchers (Secombe and Zajda 1999; Hałas 2006; 2010; Smolicz et al. 2010).

This sort of approach to collecting personal data is designed to tap into the consciousness of the writers, with minimal influence from the researcher. Respondents are encouraged to write their thoughts and feelings, aspirations and assessments. There is scope for respondents to recall some events, select certain incidents and omit others, according to their judgment at the moment of writing. It then becomes the researcher's role to interpret the personal data from the perspective of those who provided them (Secombe and Zajda 1999; Hałas 2000; Secombe 2013).

Memoir Analysis

According to Znaniecki (1945; 1963; 1968), humanistic sociological researchers needed to be able to clearly distinguish between two sorts of facts, concrete and cultural, which could be used in different but complementary ways in the analysis of personal documents like memoirs. In analyzing the memoirs of young people of Polish background in Australia, Smolicz and Secombe (1981) developed a concise overview of the sources of concrete and cultural facts to be found in a set of memoirs or personal statements and the different ways they could be used in humanistic sociological analysis.

In Smolicz and Secombe's table (reproduced as Figure 1 [see Appendix]), the term "concrete facts" refers to information which the writers of memoirs or personal documents give about the objective realities of themselves and their daily lives, such as age, birthplace, place of residence, and citizenship. In addition, they may give details of the language they speak at home, their religious affiliation, or their

participation in sport and recreation. These facts, by their very nature, are able to be checked if necessary against other sources of information. Concrete facts are important in humanistic sociological analysis because they indicate who the writers are, what their cultural context is, and what cultural values they actually activate (Secombe and Zajda 1999).

Cultural facts are the focus of humanistic sociological analysis because they reveal the personal world of the writers and express their individual thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. Cultural facts can be found in two different sorts of statements. The first can be regarded as revealing a cultural fact indirectly. Often writers express their assessments or evaluations of other people or social situations and conditions in general terms. Since they represent the writers' opinions and observations about people and things outside themselves, they need to be regarded as "second-hand" information; their content cannot be accepted without reference to other sources. However, underlying such opinions, it is often possible to recognize the attitudes of the writers (Secombe and Zajda 1999:300). A statement such as, *Those who enjoy playing sports are show-offs* cannot be taken as a reliable reflection of social life, but does provide a useful clue to the writers' negative attitude to sport (Maniam and Matthews 2012).

Statements based around first person pronouns (I, me, my) are easily recognized as direct cultural facts, where the writers are expressing their own personal thoughts and feelings about themselves and their actions. Such statements cannot be challenged by the researcher but need to be accepted for analysis as they stand (Secombe and Zajda 1999).

I love the excitement of playing in a team or I hate team sports, but enjoy the challenge of competing against myself are comments that directly reveal each writers' attitude to team versus individual sports, as well as their respective attitudes to others as social values (Maniam and Matthews 2012).

Australian Examples of Memoir Studies on Identity

Smolicz introduced Znaniecki's humanistic approach to sociology into the Australian context when the policy of multiculturalism was adopted by the Australian government in 1973 (Jupp 1996). At that point, there was little systematic knowledge of the nature and extent of cultural and linguistic differences in Australia or what they meant to the individuals and families concerned. Research was needed to understand the languages and cultures of the various immigrant groups and their relationship to the Anglo-Celtic-Australian majority and its dominant culture. The theory and method of humanistic sociology enabled social and cultural life to be investigated from the perspective of human beings as active participants in the dynamic process of creating and maintaining the cultural life of their group (Smolicz 1979; Maniam 2012). The investigations were able to demonstrate how each person responded individually to his or her context, while at the same time identifying the commonalities and differences across the whole group of respondents.

Four South Australian studies employing the memoir approach, mainly in the form of written or oral personal statements on particular phenomena, are

discussed. All four studies had as one of their focuses the issue of cultural identity among participants of various minority ethnic groups living in Australia. The initial study done by Smolicz and Secombe (1981) explored the perceptions of Polish minority young people, who were the children of post-World War II immigrants, concerning their education and growing up in Australia, as well as their sense of identity and belonging. One of the male respondents in the study expressed clearly a strong sense of commitment to Polish identity.

Personally, I have the hope of never losing my Polish identity. Although I do not feel the least bit prejudiced about Australians (or any other nationality), I would like to marry a Polish girl and bring up my children in the Polish spirit. ... I believe that in the company of Australians we should not attach any importance whatsoever to our nationality, whilst in the company of our countrymen we should find joy in our customs, and practice and maintain them (continually, of course, without discrimination). There is a very good chance that our culture will survive in this country, and that it will even develop in the course of time. [Smolicz and Secombe 1981:105]

Another male respondent acknowledged his Polish identity, but with much less certainty.

I cannot say anything as one hundred per cent certain concerning my Polish identity. However, I can say that I am not Australian, nor Anglo-Saxon. Simply, I do not feel Australian. It is a fact that I wasn't born in Australia, and the fact that I have also lived in other countries, has contributed to this state of affairs. Neither can I say with certainty that I am

a Pole, since I have been in Poland no more than six months and only as a “visitor.” However, nearly all my family is in Poland cousins, uncles, aunts, et cetera, while in Australia I have nobody apart from my parents. [Smolicz and Secombe 1981:103-104]

A third male respondent explained his identity in terms of a dual balance between being Polish and Australian.

I feel ideologically committed to both Poland and Australia, feeling culturally at ease in both milieus, and participate in both Anglo-Australian and Polish-Australian social structures. [Smolicz and Secombe 1981:110]

The response of yet another male respondent did not give any direct indication of his own sense of identity, but discussed instead what he saw as the pressures of assimilation to Anglo-Australian culture.

I am convinced that it is impossible to maintain two cultures, for finally one of them will become dominant depending on the environment and the impressionability of the child. ... I have been observing life in the Polish community here closely now for the last decade and have come to the conclusion that very little will remain of the fine Polish culture of which we have been so proud for generations. The young people do not care for their own language and the majority of them will forget it almost completely, if not in this generation, definitely in the next. I believe that only the few material monuments that we have built will remain to tell the story of our short stay here, and the Polish surnames, by then sadly deformed, will echo the past. [Smolicz and Secombe 1981:106]

However, the usefulness of the memoir method in revealing the writer’s attitudes is shown in this quotation. In his use of the pronoun “we” twice in the passage – “the fine Polish culture of which we have been so proud for generations” and “the few material monuments that we have built” – he indicates his positive identification with the Polish group and its culture.

The four examples given above highlight the kind of in-depth and varied data which respondents can provide when given the chance to write their own thoughts in their own way. They also illustrate the wide range of views expressed in the findings for the whole group.

Another study done by Chiro in 1998 explored the sense of identity among secondary school students of Italian background in Australia. One student considered she was basically Australian in identity, while recognizing the influence of her Italian background and friends.

I do not reject my Italian background, but I was born and bred in Australia and feel I am such. Even though I enjoy my Italian friends company so much, everyone is equal to me – no preferences. [Chiro 1998:251]

In another case, the student’s comment highlights the complex dilemma she is facing in relation to her ethnic cultural identity.

I am still going through an identity crisis and [will] probably never get over it. Australians here call me Italian, and Italians in Italy call me Australian – mainly through their own ignorance – because they

are unaware how we have continued the traditions. I consider myself mainly Italian – I speak, think, eat, dress, study, listen, pray Italian – but obviously I also have Australian influences. [Chiro 1998:254]

The study done by Maadad (2009) investigated the maintenance of Arab culture in Australia and identity among Lebanese migrants living in Australia. The comments of two of these respondents put the emphasis on their need to maintain in Australia the key elements of their Arab heritage, which were an integral part of who they were.

“Muslima” [being a Muslim women] was always repeated in my family to me and that word did not only cover my religion but also my culture, tradition, language, belief, and identity. [Maadad 2009:63]

My nationality, religion, and Arab culture are a definition for the person I am. [Maadad 2009:62]

A third Lebanese respondent explained in some detail a response based on adaptation to Australia, by combining aspects of the two cultures. Her strategy for survival was to be a creative mix of Lebanese and Australian.

The culture that I have now is a combination of Lebanese and Australian. In Lebanon, whenever I visit people, they say that I have changed and my Australian friends also keep saying to me that they like my Lebanese culture. So, I feel that I have the two combined and I know that this is the only way to be able to survive in a strange culture and not lose your own. Therefore, most Lebanese and others have altered so many things and created new ways

of life. My religion is very strong and I don’t pray as often as I should, but my faith is never any less or any different. I don’t speak Arabic as much with my children now, and even if I did, they reply back in English. I speak Anglo-Arab; that is what I say to my family, one word of Arabic and two in English and the other way around. I know that my religion, my language, and my culture are very important to me. [Maadad 2009:64]

The latest study done by Maniam (2011) employed the memoir method in the form of personal statements in response to guideline questions to investigate the sense of cultural identity among 111 Adelaide secondary school students from six different schools. Because these respondents consisted of one class of students from each school, they included those of mainstream Australian background (61), as well as those with European (34) and Asian (11), and other origins (5). The example below is typical of the way many of the mainstream respondents explained their identity.

I would consider myself an Australian mainly because I was born here and live here and support our country. I don’t feel different from any other students. If they chose to come here, then they must want to be in this country as well, which is a good thing. I consider myself Australian because that is the only country I have ever lived in. [Maniam 2011:268]

A few respondents, however, completely rejected the idea of their identity being linked to any ethnic or cultural group. One explained his position as follows.

I am Australian. I have no distinct cultural background, thus, I will never have any inclination to be in a distinct group of people of the same ethnicity as me as there isn't one. I am happy that I am of no distinct ethnicity, as I will never be influenced by any racial connection to anything. Thus, I have an unbiased view on everything as I am not very patriotic either. Strong connection to ethnicities cause tension. It is stupid. [Maniam 2011:273]

Another 13 students (all recent immigrants) related their cultural identity to their home ethnic group and not to Australia. One of the students commented on his pride in his particular cultural identity, as well as his discomfort when he was identified in a more negative way by his Australian peers.

I'd say, I am a Chinese and of course obviously I am a Chinese. I have got yellow skin, black hair, eyes, et cetera. I am proud of it. However, I do not feel so comfortable when someone [calls] me Asian, even I knew they are just joking, but, yeah, I usually don't mind. [Maniam 2011:276]

Several other students talked about their identity being attached both to Australia and another cultural group.

I feel like I am a German-Australian as my mother comes from a German family and this has heavily influenced my life. I am different to others due to the suffering my grandparents experienced during World War II. I feel my family has brought me up to be understanding of others and their beliefs. [Maniam 2011:280]

My heritage is Greek and I was brought up with a rich cultural experience of what it is like being Greek (i.e.,

attended Greek school from year [1-6], went to church regularly, Greek dance and functions as a youth, and had many friends who were of Greek or European background). Australian. Also proud to be an Aussie as I was also brought up and went through the education system in Australia. I enjoy the culture and follow AFL [Australian Football League] football. So, I am a proud Greek-Australian. [Maniam 2011:281]

A few other students explained that their cultural identity included two or more cultural groups, in addition to the Australian, for example:

I was born in Australia so I am Australian although my grandparents were not born here. Luckily, my father's father is English so I got an English name [otherwise] the rest of my family is Croatian/German. I do not feel different. [Maniam 2011:284]

I'm eighth generations on my mum's side and have French, English, Irish ancestry so I would call myself French – English – Irish – Australian. Being in a dominantly Caucasian school I feel fairly normal. [Maniam 2011:285]

These last examples illustrate the readiness of the students to discuss such personal issues and the wide range of views they expressed. They provide important evidence of the very different ways students in Adelaide secondary school classes identify themselves.

Conclusion

The Australian studies which employed the memoir method have provided deep understandings of

the various cultural groups and their adaptations. The examples in this paper point strongly the importance and relevance of the method for studies in a multicultural society like Australia. The insights gained from studies, such as the above, enabled Smolicz to make a considerable contribution to multicultural policy in Australia, especially in the area of school language, learning, and multicultural education programs in South Australia (Smolicz and Secombe 2000; Secombe 2013).

An important factor to be considered in the use of memoir method is the development by Smolicz and Secombe (1981) of the concrete and cultural facts analysis model in Figure 1 (see Appendix). This model helped to provide a systematic answer to

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Appendix

Figure 1: Concrete and Cultural Facts in Humanistic Sociological Analysis.

	Concrete Facts	Cultural Facts	
		Assessments	Attitudes
Sources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Information given (with little or no comment) in memoirs. Information derived from assessments made in memoirs. Details available to researcher (e.g., information on first degree, schools attended). 	Comments and remarks made by memoir writers concerning: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> their own actions, the actions of others, institutions, organizations. 	Thoughts, feelings, aspirations expressed by memoir writers about themselves.
Uses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Needed for interpretation of cultural facts, e.g., to know whose attitudes and values are being studied and what their social, economic, and cultural situation is. Give an indication of what cultural values are actually being activated. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Provide concrete facts about actions of writers themselves and others. Give an indirect indication of attitudes of writers. Supply indirect evidence of group values. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Are a direct source of the writers' attitudes. Provide indirect evidence of group values.

Source: Smolicz and Secombe (1981:27).

Maniam, Vegneskumar. 2014. "The Memoir Method in Educational Research From an Australian Perspective." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 10(3):48-59. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).