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Attitudes of Academics towards Biographical Learning*

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to reveal the attitudes of academics in post-doctoral research, who are studying biographical learning. A personal information form has been designed and implemented for academics. An attitude scale has been developed and data in the personal information form are used as the variables in the scale. The research results demonstrated that the opinions of academics on biographical learning are statistically different in regard to gender, age and seniority variables. No statistical differences were found for the type of faculty variable. According to the survey, male scholars have a more positive attitude towards biographical learning than females. As academics age and obtain more work experience, their attitudes towards biographical learning change positively.

INTRODUCTION

Educational sciences in general terms and adult education in particular have undoubtedly gained an important concept over the last 50-60 years, which is considered lifelong learning. According to Alheit (2009), this concept is a new way to explain the educational activities of postmodern societies. He states that lifelong learning is a concept that is quite often used and attempts to shape it have been made by organizations such as the Council of Europe and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Thus, the concept provides contributions not only to educational sciences but also to economic, political, social and cultural areas.

According to the European Commission report (2000), lifelong learning is required for two major reasons. Firstly, aknowledge-based society and economy have been launched in Europe. Individuals should reach constantly changing information sources for both their own good and the good of society. Also, they should prepare themselves for a competing job environment. Secondly, because we live in a complex world both socially and economically, we have to plan our own lives. We must contribute to society and learn to live in harmony with differences.

The first reason is a macro level of lifelong learning,which is related to a social, economic and political framework. The second reason is a micro level of lifelong learning, which concerns a biographical learning framework (Alheit 2009).

In recent years, people's life courses have changed, especially in the business world (Alheit 1994). Years ago, the time scale of individuals included education (to be ready to work), to obtain a job and settle into the same job and eventually to retire from this same job. Nowadays, especially obtaining a job and settling down, has changed for reasons such as "making a career change", "pursuing innovations" and "better education" (Schulze 1992). Therefore, especially in the business world, everyone has begun to create their own profiles (Alheit and Dauisen 2002). Moreover, the retirement period in the lifespan of individuals has been extended. States have developed new social and legal arrangements to deal with this new situation. Individuals tend to reflect on their lives and analyze and query decisions they have made and how social, economic, political, cultural and historical events have affected these decisions. As a result, they become a part of biographical learning.

Biographical learning originated in Europe and was specifically developed in Germany. It has been studied by various researchers and has been defined from different perspectives. Alheit and Dauisen (2002) defined biographical learning as adult individuals' spontaneous achievements with their own will. To Licen and Ciuha (2012), biographical learning is associated with multi-layered identity, adulthood and especially problems of identity formation in old age. According to Hof and Fischer (2010) biographical learning is a learning process in the course of human life. Agapova (2007) indicates that biographical learning is capturing a specific person's

life story and examining it with mutual interactions through group work methods. Therefore, she states that biographical learning through group work can provide more efficient results. Hallqvist (2014) states that even though biographical learning only has a 20-year history, it is an involved concept. He generalizes it as "the occurrence of general conceptions of one's biography as well as the idea of narrative coherence."

The source of knowledge in biographical learning is life stories of people. While individuals learn from their lives, the person pursuing education also learns during the process. If the learning progresses to group work, participants feed on each other's life stories as well (Licen and Ciuha 2012). However, life stories may vary depending on when the story is told, to whom the story is told, and the psychological state of the narrator (Agapova 2007). For instance, there are differences between an experienced event that related the next day and the same story told five years later. Versions of the same event we share with our friends, with our families, or with our boss may vary. Therefore, adult educators who work with biographical learning should be aware of the fact that the narrator makes some alterations based on different situations (Agapova 2007).

In biographical learning, both lifelong learning (that places the individual himself at the center of learning) and lifewide learning (that involves the individual and the social, political, economic and cultural environment of the person) are taken into consideration (Alheit 1994; Smilde 2009). Individuals generally learn through meta-reflection when other participants share their personal stories. Therefore, in such a situation transitional learning occurs (Glastra et al. 2004; Licen and Ciuha 2012). Individuals construe a new meaning to their lived experiences in the past and try to make sense of the causes of the decisions and choices made throughout life. In this context, individuals discover the learning potential that exists and evaluate the "unlived part" of their lives accordingly (Weizsacker 1956, as cited in Alheit 2009).

To date, studies about biographical learning have generally involved theoretical studies and examined individuals' life stories. Even though researchers, such as Bieata et al. (2008), Goodley et al. (2004) and others did research on biographical learning methods and made contributions to adult education, it is Peter Alheit who made the major contribution and spread the concept all over the world. Dominice (2006), West et al. (2007) and Merrill and West (2009) are other researchers who have conducted studies on the subject. The research conducted by Tedder and Biesta (2009) and Maier-Gutheil and Hof (2011) also contributed to the field. Moreover, researchers like Mulvey (2014) and Barabasch and Merrill (2014) conducted studies on biographical learning approaches for a project called 'Learning for Career and Labour Market Transition: Individual Biographies'by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop). They attempted to determine how individuals' biographies and experiences can affect and support labour market transitions. In another study by Bron and Thunborg (2015), some non-traditional students in higher education were interviewedin terms of ethical, practical and social aspects of biographical interviewing.

Objectives

The abovementioned studies have contributed biographical learning both theoretically and methodologically. However, there have been no previous studies that investigate the attitudes of adults towards biographical learning. This paper aims to determine attitudes of academics, who are attempting to learn on their own by investigating and analyzing the biographical learning approach and contribute to the field by closing this gap.The specific objective is to ascertain if there is a meaningful difference in attitudes of academics towards biographical learning with regard to the variables of gender, age, seniority and type of faculty.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for this paper uses the descriptive model. Since it is intended to reveal attitudes of academics who are studying postdoctoral research at the University of Surrey (UK) in the fall semester of 2013-2014 using biographical learning in terms of different variables, a correlational comparative survey method in descriptive model is used. Descriptive models are convenient in studies that aim to depict the past or present situations as the way they exist (Karasar 2006). The descriptive research model is divided

into two different sections: general descriptive methods and case studies. The correlational model as a method belongs to the general descriptive method. General descriptive methods are organized using the entire population or the samples or group of samples in a population consisting of many components in order to reach a general conclusion about the population (Karasar 2006). Since they are aimed at identifying changes and change degrees between two or more variables, correlational models are considered to be appropriate for this kind of study (Cohen et al. 2000).

Research Sample

The research population consisted of approximately 1200 post-doctoral scholars who were affiliated with four different faculties (law, medical sciences, social sciences and faculty of engineering and physics) at the University of Surrey in the fall semester of 2013-2014 (University of Surrey 2014).The sample group was formed after reaching 208 of these scholars. Although they volunteered to participate in the research, academics were served Turkish food. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of academics that constituted the sample group.

Table1: Demographic information of research sample

		n	*%*
Gender	Female	89	42.8
	Male	119	57.2
Age	-29	11	5.2
	30-35	53	25.48
	36-40	105	50.48
	41- +	39	18.75
Seniority	-1 year	14	6.7
	2-3 years	28	13.46
	3-4 years	94	45.19
	5+ years	72	34.61
Type of Faculty	Social Sciences	84	40.38
	Engineering and Physics	54	25.96
	Law	32	15.38
	Medical Sciences	38	18.26

The number of male academics participating in the sample group was 15 percent higher than females. Half of the post-doctoral researchers were between the ages of 36-40. The number of academics who have been doing post-doctoral research for three to four years is higher than the other groups. The highest participation rate (40%) included researchers from the social sciences.

Research Instruments

Personal Information Form: A questionnaire was prepared to obtain participants' demographic information, including their age, gender, seniority and the type of faculty with which they were affiliated.

Attitude Scale of Biographical Learning Approach: The paper, 'Attitude Scale of Biographical Learning' was developed by the researcher to apply to the target sample of the study. An inventory pool was created to develop the scale using the literature review and experts' opinions. This database was evaluated and converted to a 5-point Likert-type scale format by the researcher (Vagias 2006). Taking the necessary experts' opinions, the scale was converted into a 50-item survey. Next it was administered to 49 academicians for a validity and reliability analysis. Options were ranked as "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral","Disagree"and"Strongly Disagree". Academicians were asked to check the option that best reflected their attitudes about biographical learning.The data obtained were analyzed using computer software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 15.0 for factor analysis. Items with 0.35 and more factor loading were selected for a second analysis, and, as a result, the scale was converted into a total of 30 items. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of the scale measured .87. The final version of the 30-item scale was analyzed and its Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was calculated as 0.82 and its Bartlett Sphericity test was computed at 2202.2. Thus, the Bartlett test results are significant at the 0.05 level. These values indicate both a high consistency of the scale within itself (Demircioglu 2011) and appropriateness in terms of reliability and construct validity (Buyukozturk 2003). Afterall these processes were completed, the scale was applied to the target sample group.

Procedure

After conducting a literature review on the target research topic, features of biographical learning were listed. Then, an attitude scale on biographical learning was developed accordingly. Post-doctoral scholars were selected as the target sample group. Since they are not obliged

to lecture in classes, they do not typically have additional responsibilities other than research. Since participants' biographical learning attitudes were evaluated according to their age, gender, seniority and type of faculty, a personal information form was prepared to obtain the target data. Notices were hung on the billboards of four faculties announcing that following the scholars' participation in the research, Turkish food would be served. Thus, academicians were motivated to participate. Before participants completed the forms, they were given detailed information about the research topic and its purpose.

Data Analyses

Statistical analyses of this paper were conducted using SPSS 15.0. The obtained data were evaluated with frequency, percentage and arithmetic mean analysis. The arithmetic mean of option selection of participants was accepted as "Strongly Agree", 4.20-5.00; "Agree", 3.40-4.19; "Neutral", 2.60-3.39; "Disagree", 1.80-2.59; and "Strongly Disagree", 1.00-1.79 using a 5-point Likert type scale. Independent samples t test was used for the analysis of the response of two separate groups for the gender variable.The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was used in multi-group comparisons for the age, seniority and type of faculty variables.The Tukey Honest Significant Difference (HSD) multiple comparison test was applied to identify the groups that generated a difference in ANOVA testing. Statistical calculations were organized at a 0.05 significance level.

RESULTS

The results were grouped into four sections based on variables in the personal information form, which included gender, age, seniority and type of faculty. Thus, 30 items in the attitude scale were analyzed according to these four parameters. The following details the findings that were obtained from the research through data analysis.

Table 2 illustrates the results of academics' attitudes towards biographical learning with regard to the gender variable. According to independent sample t-test results, there is a statistically significant difference between the attitudes of post-doctoral scholars towards biographical learning with regard to their gender ($p<0.05$).The arithmetic mean of male academics corresponds to the "Strongly Agree" option in the scale whereas female academics' results were at the "Agree" level.

Table 2: Results of t-test for the role of academics' gender on biographical learning

Gender	$\bar{x}$	*s.d.*	*t*	*p*
Male	4.33	1.54	3.96	0.000*
Female	3.45	1.24		

*p<0.05

Table 3 provides the results of attitudes of academics towards biographical learning according to the variable of age. According to the ANOVA results, when comparing the scholars' attitudes towards biographical learning in terms of age, a statistically significant difference was found ($p<0.05$). In order to identify which group created a difference in the ANOVA calculations, Tukey's HSD multiple comparison test was applied and participants in the age group of 41 and above were found to be more positive and interested compared to other target groups.

Table 3: Results of ANOVA test for the role of academics' age on biographical learning

	Age				*p*
	29 and below	*30-35*	*36-40*	*41 and above*	
$\bar{x}$	3.33	3.98	4.34	5.73	0.000*
s.d.	1.32	1.80	1.61	1.35	

*p<0.05

Table 4 represents data obtained from the attitude scale of academics about biographical learning with regard to seniority. The ANOVA test was used to examine the attitude differences of academics towards biographical learning according to the seniority variable. A statistically

Table 4: Results of ANOVA test for the role of academics' seniority on biographical learning

	Seniority				*p*
	1 years and below	*2-3 years*	*3-4 years*	*5 years and above*	
$\bar{x}$	3.19	3.45	3.48	5.07	0.000*
s.d.	1.33	1.49	1.53	2.43	

*p<0.05

significant difference was found in terms of seniority ($p<0.05$). Results of the Tukey HSD multiple comparison test showed that academicians who have been working for five or more years were found to be the group that generated adifference among the sample groups. This group had a more positive attitude towards biographical learning than other target groups.

Table 5 illustrates the results of academics' attitudes towards biographical learning in terms of type of faculty variable. According to ANOVA results, no statistically significant difference was found among the academics with regard to the faculty with which they are affiliated ($p>0.05$). For instance, all the results of the academics corresponded to the option of "Agree" in the scale.

Table 5: Results of ANOVA test for the role of type of faculty on biographical learning

	Type of Faculty				*p*
	Social Sciences	*Engineering and Physics*	*Law*	*Medical Sciences*	
$\bar{x}$	3.43	3.83	3.67	3.57	0.12
s.d.	0.79	1.34	1.37	1.22	

DISCUSSION

At the end of the study, statistically significant differences were identified between the attitudes of female and male academics in regard to the biographical learning approach. This difference favours male participants. This concurs with Alheit's (1994) findings. It was also found that male participants when given opportunity to share their experiences with others, see this as a chance to develop both themselves and their audience through their past experiences. However, female participants do not view their experiences to be as helpful and instructive as male academics. Furthermore, male participants supposed they could easily cope with problems related to their biographical life without going through an adult education process. This result is in line with what Alheit (1992) proposed. However, female participants desired to attend a structured adult education process when they encountered hurdles and life problems. Both female and male academics were of the same opinion about that their current learning status, and believed that it may be the result of their upbringing, friends, social environment and economic conditions. The results obtained from this study are in accordance with Bruner's (1996) explanation that learning is a cultural process.

Another result obtained in this paper is that as post-doctoral scholars get older, their attitudes towards biographical learning proceed in a positive way. The arithmetic mean of those 41 and above is quite high compared to other groups regarding biographical learning. The result is consistent with the comments Agapova (2007) highlighted in her study. Agapova states that as people get older, their biographical stories become more important. Also, they compare the events they live today with the experiences they went through in the past. Finally, the decisions they make today become a product of their past experiences. Indeed, those 41 and over stated that when they experience first time events that are similar or overlap with past experiences, they have a more positive attitude and adapt more easily to the new situation. However, when there is a contrast with the past experiences or no similarity, they stated that they generally remain indifferent. Moreover, academics point out that this kind of experience gives them a chance to understand themselves better. This result is in line with Bron and Thunborg (2015) who state that interviewees have an opportunity to learn about themselves in biographical interviews.

As academics' seniority increases, their ideas about biographical learning change in a positive way. This conclusion is consistent with the results based on the age variable. While individuals' length of service increases in a job environment, their experience regarding their jobs increases in direct proportion. This situation can be experienced independently of the age variable. Thus, an older adult who starts a new job can benefit from a young adult's biographical story since the latter has more years and experience in the target job environment. However, an individual's biographical story and the stories of business life are different from each other in some cases. In the biographical stories, the stories of other people and events can be nested. Such conditions might not emerge in business life experiences (Agapova 2007). However, surveyed academics state that since events they experience in their business lives are intertwined with other people's life events and stories, their business lives should not be regarded as from a different viewpoint.This result also supports the research of Barabasch

and Merrill (2014) and Mulvey (2014) since in both studies individuals work-life transitions and experiences are highlighted.

According to the type of faculty affiliation, no statistically significant difference was found regarding the academicians' thoughts about biographical learning. However, the arithmetic mean of the academicians from the faculty of engineering and physics is higher than other types of faculty members. The main reason for this difference is that engineering and physics faculty members were especially interested in the idea of "biographical coaching" idea. "Biographical coaching" is based on the idea that both the learner and mentor make the discovery together on a specific subject and the source is their past learnings and knowledge of their biographical histories (Alheit 1994). Therefore, academics from computer and electronic engineering departments generally work and study in similar ways.

CONCLUSION

The present study found that the opinions of academics on biographical learning are statistically different in regard to gender, age and seniority variables. There is not any statistical difference in the type of faculty variable. According to the survey, male scholars have more positive attitude towards biographical learning than females. Moreover, it is concluded that as academics age and gain more work experience, their attitudes towards biographical learning change for the positive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Biographical learning is a concept that originated in Europe. However, with the increase of quality of life and life spans throughout the world, any researcher from any part of the world can conductexperimental studies on the subject. Therefore, biographical learning could be a worldwide concept. The target group of this paper was only post-doctoral academics. Additionally, the research variables included gender, age, seniority and type of faculty. With the same or more different variables that are used in this study, individuals from different job fields could be surveyed in the future.

NOTE

*This study is an improved and extended version of the research, "A Different Approach in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Biographical Learning", which was presented at the First Eurasian Educational Research Congress, Istanbul University, Turkey, April 24-26, 2014.

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