

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society

“Says who?” Life stories and people with intellectual disability

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society  Amie O’Shea
PhD student 

Melbourne, Australia www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

What is a life story?

- ‘Story/ies of my life’
- Autobiographical era
- Audience
- First person, owned account by a person with intellectual disability
- Can use pictures, video, drawings, photos, poetry. But always has words

The pioneers



Mabel Cooper







Dorothy Atkinson


 www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

Why life stories?

“People were (and still are) invisible because of their symbolic and actual exclusion from ordinary life. Various seen as threats to society, the perpetrators of numerous social ills, as impaired, vulnerable or otherwise afflicted victims, they have led separate and segregated lives. They have been silent because ... the rest of society has chosen not to listen, and has thereby systematically devalued their lives.”

 www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs


Why life stories?

...We have not listened primarily because we have believed that people with [intellectual disability] had no capacity for understanding or conveying their own situation or experiences ... Now autobiography holds out the promise that those ‘lost voices’ may yet be recovered.”

(Atkinson & Walmsley, 1999 p209)

- Benefits for the story-teller
- Benefits for others







 www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

Benefits in writing a life story

“My story and a lot more will help people with a learning difficulty, and I hope it will learn them to tell their story of what happened to them. Other people too can learn ... They learn what things went on all those years and they learn to change: they listen and learn. It’s not just my story and what happened to me, it happened to loads of people.”



“Now I’m encouraging other people to tell their stories. I think it’s good, and I think it teaches the public that people with learning difficulties are not going to hurt anyone and all the time we can get people to write their story and tell what happened to them, and publish it ... then it helps everyone.”

 www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

Individual and group life stories












 www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

Life stories in research

- Life stories have been collected and used as data in intellectual disability research on:
 - history of intellectual disability
 - sexuality
 - being women with intellectual disability
 - people with intellectual disability going to prison
 - abuse

BUT...

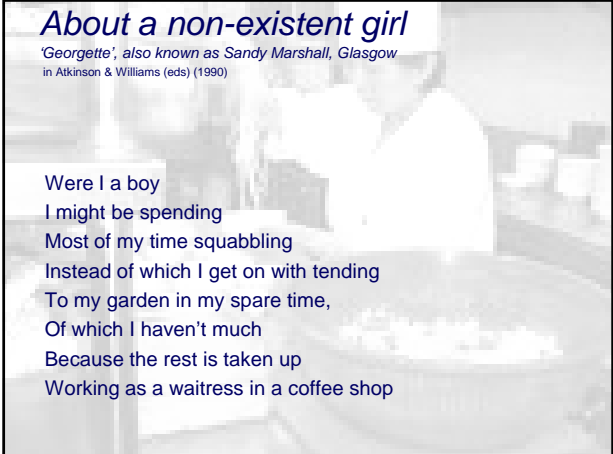




www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

About a non-existent girl

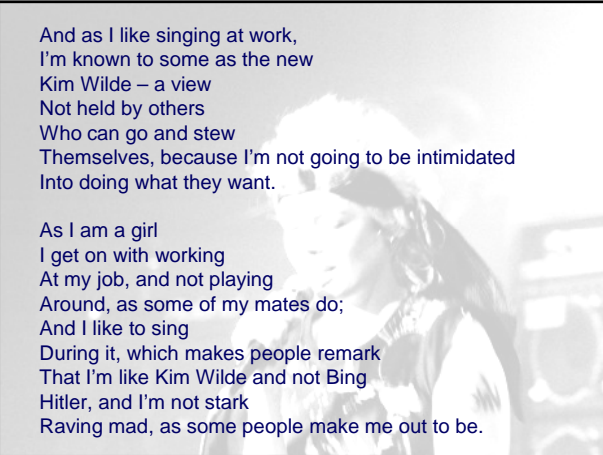
'Georgette'; also known as Sandy Marshall, Glasgow
in Atkinson & Williams (eds) (1990)

Were I a boy
I might be spending
Most of my time squabbling
Instead of which I get on with tending
To my garden in my spare time,
Of which I haven't much
Because the rest is taken up
Working as a waitress in a coffee shop

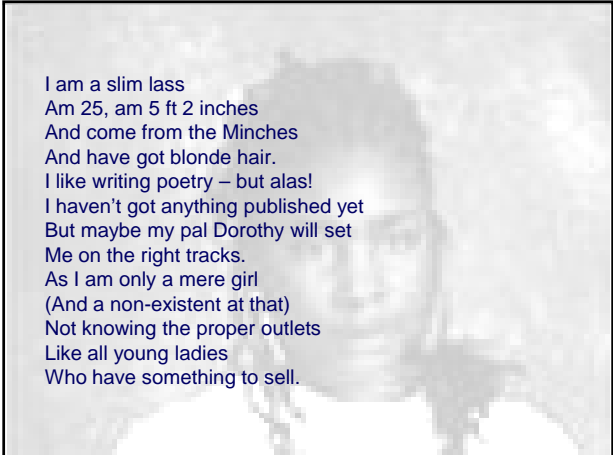


And as I like singing at work,
I'm known to some as the new
Kim Wilde – a view
Not held by others
Who can go and stew
Themselves, because I'm not going to be intimidated
Into doing what they want.

As I am a girl
I get on with working
At my job, and not playing
Around, as some of my mates do;
And I like to sing
During it, which makes people remark
That I'm like Kim Wilde and not Bing
Hitler, and I'm not stark
Raving mad, as some people make me out to be.

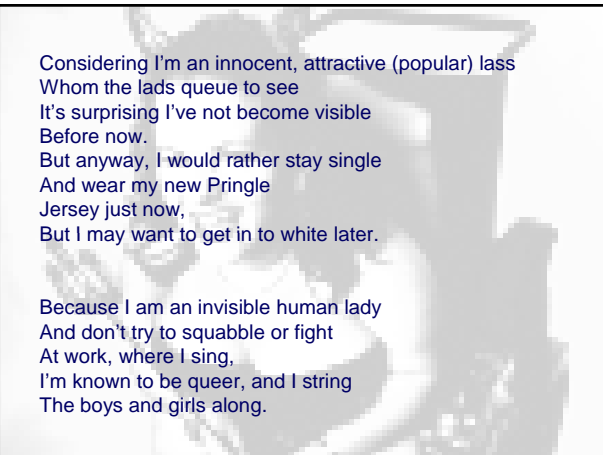


I am a slim lass
Am 25, am 5 ft 2 inches
And come from the Minches
And have got blonde hair.
I like writing poetry – but alas!
I haven't got anything published yet
But maybe my pal Dorothy will set
Me on the right tracks.
As I am only a mere girl
(And a non-existent at that)
Not knowing the proper outlets
Like all young ladies
Who have something to sell.




Considering I'm an innocent, attractive (popular) lass
Whom the lads queue to see
It's surprising I've not become visible
Before now.
But anyway, I would rather stay single
And wear my new Pringle
Jersey just now,
But I may want to get in to white later.

Because I am an invisible human lady
And don't try to squabble or fight
At work, where I sing,
I'm known to be queer, and I string
The boys and girls along.



What is it like to write a life story?

- Exciting and scary
- Sad and happy
- Difficult to remember some things
- Feel proud at the end
- Lots of memories – good and bad
- Time to think and talk
- Might change your mind about what to include



www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

What is it like to write a life story?

- You both need:
 - patience and trust
 - mutual respect
 - commitment for however long it takes
 - to be inventive and creative
 - to be able to communicate well
 - honesty
 - to agree on who 'owns' the final product and what will be done with it



www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

"Says who?"

- Life stories with young women (18-30):
 - individual
 - group
- Using:
 - photovoice
 - other stories



www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

"Says who?"

In March next year I will be looking for interested young women aged 18-30 who have used a service specifically intended for people with an intellectual disability.



Stay tuned!



www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs

Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society

Amie O'Shea
aloshea@students.latrobe.edu.au
 03 9285 5104



Melbourne, Australia

www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs