Performance, Reflexivity, and Learning Through Biographical-Narrative Research

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Abstract

This article provides a critical reflection on biographical-narrative research based on research experience with qualitative methodology, particularly with the application of phenomenological and existential methods with rural women in processes of socio-laboral transition. Focusing on this methodological approach, this article will consider: (a) the use and importance of the biographical-narrative approach in social sciences, (b) the main tensions and paradoxes that exist today in studies based on interpretative-critical methods, (c) the biographical-narrative research process using life stories, their phases, tasks, and contributions to science. Joining theoretical and field research, the author shows how the biographical-narrative method and its performance favor critical reflection and shared learning. The reflection on one's own experience this method provides gives a person a sense of authorship regarding her life, and contributes to the development and transformation of the participants.

The Value of Positioning Oneself for Transforming Reality

Life-history/narrative inquiry is one of the research approaches in the social sciences, that is based on the conviction that scientific knowledge cannot be generated at a distance from reality or is dubious that do not improve people's lives. In the 1920s, the Chicago School began to carry out analyses of immigrant populations using their biographies or life stories.[1] Research takes a new direction here, taking into account the criticisms of traditional research. The popularity and number of studies using the life-history/narrative method have grown in recent decades (Denzin, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Burke (1973) understands stories to be "equipment for living," as they are tools that allow us to understand, reflect, negotiate, transform, and create. According to Pujadas (2000), "the revitalization of humanistic approaches in the social sciences over the past two decades can be interpreted as a reaction to the long-lasting hegemonic role of positivist perspectives from the 1940s to the 1970s" (p. 127).

Narratives have been used as a basis for processes of personal and social transformation, and as motivations for these processes, as well. Gender and intercultural research has shown the features and biases in our history. Without people's testimonies, without their narratives and interpretations, history cannot be reconstructed. Each individual has a personal dimension as well as a collective one, making it possible to study personal circumstances only in connection with the contexts that endow them with meaning (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick, Walsh, & Brown, 2011). Because of this, both discourses and practices are included (Martín Criado, 1998), validating the use of narratives among disadvantaged populations. Narrative captures the processes of economic, political, and cultural change from the perspective of workers and in contexts that need of social transformation. Similarly, using this perspective regarding change, research has been developed in the spheres of teacher training (professional development for teachers), the development of school programs (program and institutional improvement and innovation), and student teaching in school.

The big boom in life-history/narrative research, then, has to do with the predominance and relevance of social actors in the research process (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). This approach, with the involvement of "regular people" in the research, is applied to many fields (sociology, history, education, psychology, etc.), making oral and written history an object of multidisciplinary study. Whatever the object to be studied (personal and professional trajectories, people, contexts, interactions, meanings, etc.), the life-history/narrative method has

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formative value based on the preparation of and reflection on one's own history. Some authors speak of meta-training to refer to the capacity and functionality of the reflexive processes that life-histories/stories generate (Laine, 2000). This is because this referent produces a reaffirmation or restoration of one's own self, endowing the person with greater confidence and personal autonomy.

Adopting this kind of approach means considering the participant' subjective consciousness, emphasizing the role of meanings, reflexive knowledge, and words ("voice") in shaping one's own experience. According to García Pastor (2005), "the concept of voice is related to the acknowledgment of the right to express oneself and to be taken into account, each person as he or she is, without the condition of having to adopt a strange, imposed language or way of representation (as defined by the concepts of symbolic violence and cultural dominance)" (p. 180). Importance is given to honoring the voice of those who are socially excluded. Listening to their voices and to the sensitive issues manifested through their voices involves signifying one's own subjectivity, acknowledging that one is part of society (Adams, 2008; Ellis, 2007). Following this line of reasoning, the value of writing and orality is highlighted, insofar as "narration allows a discourse that is closer to life, to experiences and to experience, a discourse that can, in turn, wrap itself naturally around the expression of the thoughts, the feelings, and the desires of the people involved" (Arnaus, 1995, p. 224).

Accordingly, life-history/narrative research cannot take place without a laborious deconstruction/reconstruction of identity. This idea is interesting for two main reasons. First, due to the influence that the transmission of culture can have on shaping identity, and second, based on a concept of the subject as an active being, a concept that is necessary when mentioning processes of restructuration or transformation of one's own experience. Both aspects interact, because research participants, as social actors involved in creating their own history (Laine, 2000), constructing and reconstructing reality from the particular meaning each ascribes to it. Davies and Gannon (2006) and Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) reinforce this idea when they refer to each subject's historical memory. The descriptions of events or occurrences are not aseptic; rather, they are narrated with reference to past experiences and each individual's sense of appropriating culture is shown. Following these lines, and in agreement with the approaches Gómez, Puigvert, and Flecha (2011) present regarding critical communicative methodology, my position as a researcher intends to respond to the dialogic nature of the relationship between sciences itself and the social situations it studies.

Tensions in the Life-History/ Narrative Method?

Life-history/narrative research is inscribed in an interpretative approach, through qualitative and critical communicative

methodology. However, studies that are defined as life-history/narrative studies are often not really such, considering the difficulties in defining concepts such as paradigm, approach, methodology, and method. Today, the life-history/narrative method drags some problems along with it. These problems come from the dichotomization of normalized science as it constructs dualities and categories such as objectivity-subjectivity, control-naturalization, participation-non-participation, truth-error. In short, these categories lead us to exclude the person and his or her context, in tendencies toward the greatest possible objectivity by separating research from the researched, and by investigating situations ad hoc, that are almost artificial, under supposed neutrality.

Although today research on subjective involvement, as with concrete, individual persons immersed in a specific context, is given priority, dualities regarding subjectivity and objectivity and qualitative-quantitative do, in fact, continue to appear. Referring to this, Bolívar (2002) mentions two kinds of narrative research (paradigmatic analysis and narrative analysis), pointing out that, even though both are legitimate for constructing scientific knowledge, they imply different forms, results, and criteria of validation. This introduces a problem with respect to validity, and to ethical and scientific guarantees, leading authors such as Taylor and Bogdan (1986) to point out the need to determine "truth" criteria similar to those that govern positivist research. This referent of research has become so predominant in science that, even though critical research is gaining recognition, we always tend to wonder about the "quality" of our data, with quality understood to be validity and reliability, not only in the sense of well-done research but in the sense of the insistent need to generalize knowledge. When MacLure (2011) refers to "ruptures" in qualitative research, she also focuses on them from a traditional hierarchical and lineal structure of thought/knowledge: "We have argued for new forms of relationality and responsibility, yet many of our "field" encounters are still regulated by liberal-humanist ethics and notions of "open" dialogue" (p. 998) The reflection is out there but is closed down, when we state that each method or technique is good for certain objectives and complementary methodologies are necessary to study a problem properly. We agree that complementary methods and techniques mean greater richness (Flick, 2011), but our doubts reappear when we suggest that, even if we define ourselves as qualitative researchers, we can carry out with us quantitative investigation. This depends mainly on the research approach, on the way we apply the techniques, and on the way we deal with the results obtained (a quantitative analysis of qualitative data is possible).

If knowledge is constructed in interaction with another by means of a play of subjectivities that cross one another (Adams, 2008; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gonick, Walsh, & Brown, 2011), "narrative is not only a methodology; as Bruner (1988) pointed out, it is a way of constructing reality,

so that we could say that methodology is based on an ontology" (Bolívar, 2002, p. 4). The narrative process provides a critical communicative organization of research (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011) that: (a) reinforces the relations between researchers and the people who participate in their research, (b) foments an understanding of the problems by the people involved, and (c) helps them to generate solutions. I believe that everyone is capable of analyzing and interpreting her or his own reality, and that research empowers the participants and provides them with tools to act and transform their reality.

This means that we need to emphasize an interpretative research process. Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006) opt for "emancipatory research" with explicit objectives of improving and transforming people's lives. Life-history/narrative research involves a process of reflecting on and reconstructing experience narrated by a person, something beyond the mere application of qualitative techniques, something more than just another qualitative methodology to add to the list. It refers to a process of in-depth research that requires introspection, preparation, and the understanding of meanings based on phenomenology and hermeneutics. Therefore, following Bourdieu (1980, 1985), and Husserl (1992), what we are interested in is reaching vital and social experience just as it appears in its everyday manifestations. From this perspective, it is important to highlight the symbolic value of the word and its media capacity, and this process involves "participating in first person."

This approach requires a qualitative and critical communicative methodology for gathering data from an internal perspective (Salazar Perez & Cannella, 2011). This methodology becomes relevant because the changes, more than in the number, are in new ways of relating to others and of living. By paying attention to subjective issues, we can mark the way to proceed in research, characterizing the processes for entering, remaining in, and leaving the scene, as well as the relation with the main characters. However, another paradox appears here: the relationship between what the participant says and what she really does comes up against the following question if our research is accurate: How sure are we that the informant is telling us the truth, or how can we gain access to the true or best discourse?[2] This issue submerges us in what Ceglowski, Bacigalupa, & Peck (2011) call "censhorship of qualitative research." Qualitative researches, and specifically biographical-narrative methods, are once again undergoing a critical moment in the social sciences. Barone (2007) suggests new predominances of gold standards in research, many of which, far from contributing quality to the studies and methods that are applied, questions the researcher about the kind of research that is more highly valued on the scientific level, face with obtaining positive evaluations of research activity. Thus, the future of narrative inquiry in educational research is in doubt (Ceglowski, Bacigalupa, & Peck, 2011). Increasingly, the number of publications of qualitative inquiry is declining because they exact a higher time and professional cost, local studies that favor the understanding and transformation of social and educational phenomena are discredited, and the research career is "bureaucratized," with quantity being valued more than quality in scientific production (Suarez-Ortega, García-Mingo, & Ruiz-San Román, in press). Along these same lines, the validity and trustworthiness of these kinds of studies is questioned (Butter, 2000, 2005; Ellis, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2007; Zylinka, 2005).

The Research Process Through the Biographical-Narrative Approach

Using Life Stories

In general, life-history/narrative[3] research has been developed through the use of accounts/life-histories, either oral or written. This method agglutinates different concepts such as ethnography, case studies, autobiographies and biographies, diaries, letters, photographs, and performance. Life stories are defined as a conversation/narration technique and are involved in reconstructing processes of development or learning, based on the use of narrative, orality, or writing. They involve retrospective narration by the person who is the main character of the story, based on a part of the experience or approaching it as a whole (Brinkmann, 2011). Because of this, according to Laine (2000), the analysis of practices and/or life experiences is carried out from the complexity of a multidimensional identity. In the story, that which is individual goes along with that which is collective, fruit of the cultural construction that is projected onto it. However, the subjects' trajectories and their narratives do not depend solely on the scenarios and contexts in which they occur, but also on the decisions that the people involved make throughout the narration (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006). What to tell and what to say, as well as how to interpret it; depend on the characteristics of the process, on the people who are participating, and on the degree of their awareness before the account or story. Specifically, we understand a life-history/narrative investigation to have the following characteristics:

- The participant's subjective consciousness is given priority, with emphasis on the meanings and with an effect on reflexive knowledge. The person's "authenticity" comes into play (Curtis, 1978).
- It's referent tries to answer the question of how people endow their own lives, or specific moments of their lives, with meaning, showing interest in subjective issues (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994).
- Giving voice to people is considered relevant, especially giving voice to those who are socially excluded. The person who participates in the action develops reflexive processes regarding her own existence, putting her desires and future

projects into play, from the past that characterizes her (Molinié, 2000; Pineau, 2000).

- The life-history/narrative method makes culture important as a mediating element in people's development processes. Thus, each person's life acquires meaning within a group and from a social context of reference (Davies & Gannon, 2006). Because of this, the social or collective nature of the biography is highlighted (together with its individual nature). A diversity of structures is involved in the context, and so not only are the micro aspects mentioned—the ones that intervene in people's lives directly—but also the other macro aspects, referring to the economic, political, social, and cultural context surrounding the phenomenon. The story is produced or constructed between the participant himself and the sociocultural and normative reference factors.

Alonso (1999) reinforces this idea when he refers to each subject's historical memory. This can be seen because it is not an aseptic description of the facts or events that is given; rather, they are narrated with reference to past experiences, showing the meaning of cultural appropriation in each individual. As Ginnette and Blanche (2000, p. 189) explain, "each person becomes aware that they come into the world at a specific moment in economic, political, cultural, and scientific history, and tries to understand the impact of these events on his life course." In short, the biographical method is intimately related to the shaping of existence (Delory-Monberger, 2004a, 2004b; Pineau, 2000). History shapes the participant and the participant simultaneously shapes history, producing a bidirectional reconstruction process. Thus, the historical and sociocultural dimension is inescapable for achieving an understanding of events (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994). This necessarily requires the involvement of the participant in creating her own story (Laine, 2000), considering the elements that mediate this process.

A Path With its Own Identity

Based on my research experience, life stories are created by successive interviews (a minimum of three rounds), using open or in-depth interviews. This is the kind of interview that makes it possible to know and understand meaningful experiences in women's lives, as they interpret, give meaning to, and explain them. Carrying out these interviews, as Woods (1998) notes, "indicates a free, open, democratic, bidirectional, and informal process, in which individuals can show them as they are, without feeling tied to certain roles" (p. 82) According to Wolgemuth and Donohue (2006), the open interview is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for doing emancipatory research. Narrative inquiry is understood "as intervention" (p. 1027), with the

purpose of implementing freeing and transforming (according to Foucault's and Freire's pedagogy). For this reason, the open nature of the process does not mean a lack of attention to issues of design or preparation. Open interviews are not informal conversations; they have, on the contrary, clear purposes and intentions, and require implicit schemes in their development. The schedule of questions, which is orientative, becomes relevant in the process and becomes more specific as the cycle of interviews develops. The schedule of questions is a list of subjects that the interview focuses on. Similarly, the questions become important, because the responses given by the person interviewed depend largely on the kind of issues formulated. Because of this, the questions in this kind of interview should be generative (with guide questions and support questions) to stimulate the discourse.

Following what different authors suggest on this subject (Gotees & LeCompte, 1988; Spradley, 1979; Woods, 1998), other differentiating elements of in-depth interviews, in addition to the kind and form of the questions, are the explicit purpose of these interviews, the explanations the interviewer gives to the interviewee, a process of mutual learning, the interpersonal relationship established in the process, the roles adopted by each person throughout, the researcher's previous training and experience, and the establishment of the conditions under which the interviews are conducted. Although the reflection increases progressively, the phase of development and interviewing becomes more relevant in this kind of research. The development process is open, flexible, and complex, and requires consensus and negotiation between the participants (interviewer and interviewee). The relationship should be characterized by rapport, although at first there is mutual mistrust until there has been more contact. This time requires a general analysis of the situation to be explored. To this end, the researcher should show a constant attitude of listening, attention, affective involvement, and sincerity.

Regarding the number of histories/stories, it is important to consider the criterion of saturation of information proposed by Denzin (1970), still applied in ethnographic research. A field of study should be studied until the incorporation of a new case no longer contributes anything new and is redundant with reference to previously obtained information (Bertaux, 1993). In general, the saturation of speech fields occurs with a relatively low number of histories/accounts (considering that very rich productions are obtained from each informant). Gathering information is one of the most time-consuming tasks in life-history/narrative research. From the moment that the first data is collected, the researcher begins the partial pre-analysis of the datum, leading to constant questions and working hypotheses that orient the research. To capture the meaning of the data, the researcher must remain in the field long enough and not be in a hurry to leave. Similarly, the researcher should use

information obtained by complementary techniques, this being fundamental to triangulation the information. Entering the analytic phase, I believe that critical incidents, conceptual maps, and biograms are useful techniques for analyzing the information (Suarez-Ortega, 2008):

- Critical incidents make it possible to detect the points of change in people's lives, the most meaningful aspects that they are telling us about or narrating and that have given meaning to their experiences.
- Conceptual maps allow us to give meaning, at the beginning, to the data, especially if the information is organized jointly with the person who is providing it.
- Biograms are a more global, complex technique that makes it possible to establish people's life paths, highlighting the most relevant events or occurences, their chronology, and the interviewee's interpretations or evaluations of these events. I believe that biograms should be prepared individually, as they will organize the information chronologically.

When we analyze the information, it is a good idea to seek discursive coherence, even though there may be contradictions in the discourse (Flick, 2011). These contradictions should be considered natural, a sign that practices change or that the person adapts to them in different ways and then the discourses change. This is important to counteract possible biases that may appear, because the participant does not always say what she thinks or think what she says. In this sense, cross-checks of the discourses, with the same informant and/or with others (for example, cross and parallel life-histories) are a good idea. The analysis must be carried out case by case and in general, as this will help to identify different discourses.

To foment transparency in the discourses, it is important to include observation, consider symbolic elements (what people want to say but don't, what is half said, what is said with gestures or facial expressions but not verbally, and what is narrated that at first seems nonsensical) (Polkinghorne, 2007; Zylinka, 2005). All of this contributes tensions to the discourses that define discursive realities and practices. The researcher's task is to find the meaning in each narration. Also, when the researcher analyzes the discursive information, she seeks the meaning of the narration and the change generated in informants (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011). Complemented with other information-gathering techniques, especially observation techniques, this referent increases the credibility of the research and the veracity of the data (Taylor & Bodgan, 1986). "This contrast is a key element of Critical Communicative Methodology and helps explain its transformative potential. In the dialogue between these two types of knowledge new knowledge arises, knowledge that is adapted to the problems the subjects are facing and includes specific proposals to improve the situation" (Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011, p. 237).

Once the process of analyzing the information is concluded, the next job is to prepare the report of the results. This report should be organized according to the most relevant information provided by the informants, with an attempt to reflect the sequence of analysis and the different discourses. The written report should be clear and simple and should accurately present the data obtained. To do this, it is important to return the partial and total information to the informants, comparing interpretations and/or analyses with them. When it comes time to write the report, it is important not to lose the richness, the dynamic nature, and the vivacity of the process, although this is hard to reflect when what the interviewer has experienced with the interviewee must be put down on article. It is important, therefore, to include references to the people and the contexts, respecting the ethical norms regarding the anonymity of the information, returning the information to the people who produce it, and respecting the decision to include or exclude discursive material.

Doing and Validating Biographical-Narrative Research

Doing the Research . . . Transforming the Lives of Spanish Rural Women

Life history is one of the most potent techniques for benefitting learning and existential development. This is even truer in the field of career orientation and when we work with disadvantaged groups of rural women. To study women's professional trajectories,[4] the previous experiences they have had on different vital levels must be taken into account. The context itself and the historical period in which the women live must be added to these analytic dimensions. Specifically, the 40 women who participated in the study belong to four rural contexts in Andalusia (Spain). They were between 35 and 55 years old and had developed their lives in the period of the 1950s and 1960s, when there were not many training or professional opportunities for women. Their life plans were conditioned by a patriarchal system, limited to carrying out the traditional roles of wife, mother, and housewife. These are the roles the women we worked with devoted themselves to for most of their lives.

To carry out this research, we felt it was necessary to use life stories as the main technique for women's self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-determination. We consider this technique to be a means for professional reorientation, contributing to professional preparation and life projects according to the women's new interests and expectations. The

objective was to analyze women's professional development from the perspective of past, present, and future, essential for preparing life stories. This perspective marks the research transversally. First, we intended to explore the women's training and work situations to understand the changes that were taking place in their lives. Second, we wished to become familiar with the references that they had acquired in the past in their lives, to find meaning in the present, and to establish the possible meaning on which this present is based. Third, we wanted to know about the women's interests, desires, and expectations, establishing their paths toward future professional/life improvement.

The framework of this study was an interpretative-critical approach to research, directed toward self-exploration and reconstructing experience. It was framed in terms of a qualitative method and, specifically, used a biographical-narrative method. Pineau (2000) highlights the relationship between narrative and constructivist, and systemic learning processes. This is precisely where life history, as a technique for professional exploration, crystallization, and specification, becomes especially interesting (Patton, 2009; Patton & MacMahon, 2006). This is because this procedure tries to respond to how people endow their own lives or specific moments and situations in them with meaning and/or significance. It is particularly useful to "accompany, orient, give rise to, and facilitate the construction of personal projects" (Josso, 2000, p. 71).

The main strategy chosen for this research process, for the aforementioned reasons, was the life history/story. This technique provides an in-depth, systemic, and intensive analysis carried out individually by the women. It also contributes a diachronic vision (as well as a synchronic one) that allows us to know and understand the object of study. According to Laine (2000), the analysis of life practices and/or experiences is carried out from the complexity of a multidimensional identity. However, the trajectories of the participants and their narrations do not depend solely on the scenes or contexts where they develop, but also on the decisions that the people involved made throughout the narration. What they tell and what they say, as well as the way they interpret it, depends on the characteristics of the process, on the people who participate, and on the degree of awareness or level of reflection they have reached regarding the situation, before telling the story.

The women who participated in the life stories were selected following criteria of diversity of profiles and maximum variability of the informants. Aspects such as age, personal and professional situation, involvement in training activities, context of origin, and availability to participate in the research were taken into account. Preparing one's own life story implies continuous direct involvement and active participation. This is a key aspect and people who participate in analytic processes of this kind must be aware of this. Regarding the number of stories taken, it is important to consider the criteria of information saturation. This occurred in our study after eight cases.

An orientative *question guide* was used as a tool for creating the life stories. This guide was made up of a series of clichés to be explored, clichés that were ordered (as a time sequence) and that allowed both the interviewer and the interviewee to situate them when it came to asking and telling/narrating, respectively. In general, three *biographical stages* were developed:

- In the *first* stage, a general sketch of the trajectories covered by the women was obtained, placing the emphasis on the previous (past) references that characterize them. In this sense, issues relating to the circumstances in which the informants were born and grew up, the most meaningful stages or milestones in their lives, and their previous and present professional situations, were discussed. At the end of this stage, a balance of all the contributions was made, highlighting relevant points to give the accounts continuity. Here are some brief examples of the discourses presented by the women in this stage of their biographies.

In 1957 when I was born, you can imagine how few resources there were and how people lived. My father worked as a field hand and my mother helped him and took care of the house. There were harder times when less money came in because farming was very unstable. I remember my childhood as nice, in spite of the poverty . . . I finished primary school and wanted to work, I needed to help out at home and I had to work at whatever I could, seasonal work in the fields, cleaning houses, taking care of children, or sewing. My family did not have sufficient economic means, there were problems, lots of problems, that resulted in my parents separating when I was grown up, and I had a really bad time with that and it affected me a lot. (Informant, María)

I was born in 1958 and I was the first girl of six boys. At the beginning you don't realize, but then you start discovering how this can change your life, especially if your parents' way of thinking and the way of thinking of the whole period is so rigid, where women are seen as just for marrying, having children, and devoting themselves to taking care of everyone else. That is kind of how my life was: working, working, and working more for others, nobody paying me anything, not being able to devote myself to studying and seeking a professional future. (Informant, Concha)

- In the *second* biographical stages, in-depth work was done on the informants' specific situations, although

emphasis was placed on exploring a series of topics in each case. Specifically, the second stage focused on exploring the present dimension (professional/life transitions). The way the women perceived and interpreted transitional moments (professional/life change) was emphasized, as well as the way they evaluated them with respect to the future. Other issues, such as the subjective meaning of work, the centrality of the job role, lifestyles, self-concept, and the women's professional and vital representations, were also considered. A few short examples will show the discourses the women produced in this stage of the biographies:

When I didn't have these problems, I could approach life differently, takes courses now and then and look for a job. For me, getting married repressed me, because, since I didn't have an education or a stable job . . . oh, yes, I quit the job that I did have. Now I am fighting to follow what I left behind, now I realice, but, of course, a lot of time has gone by and you are more aware of your life. (Informant, Ana)

(. . .) work also made an important mark on me, work, work when I started to work in houses, that's a job that it seems like you can't get out of it, you want to work at something else and the only work you have is cleaning and maybe you find something else… but cleaning, you know? (Informant, Angelita)

Here, what kind of jobs are you going to look for? There aren't any jobs here, yes, I mean, I'm on the list of job vacancies at the town hall, and if they take on another girl, it will be me because I'm first on the list, but that won't solve anything at all for me. If there are olives, I'll go pick olives . . . I work at whatever comes up in the village. (Informant, Rosa).

(. . .) now, once summer is over, I am going to see what I kinds of things I can do, how I can do them… because the main thing is time, and I have time, and the desire, I want to learn, the thing is, I don't have much support from others, but, oh well. I also think I have to decide on my own (. . .). So, the truth is, I would like to find a job, an option that I like and that makes me feel motivated and that I am developing myself, something that I have never had, you know? Tos ay I have a job and I get paid for it, I think that that is very important for a person, I tell my daughter that. (Informant, Aurora)

- In the *third* stage, emphasis was given to exploring the women's projections for the future and on professional/life planning. At his point, previous

aspects converged with those being explored (future aspects), establishing connections among significant milestones. Issues regarding the women's professional projections (job values, interests, and decision-making), the degree of definition or specificity of professional/life plans, and the characteristics of these plans, as well as the aspects that condition women in reorienting their careers were dealt with. In this final stage, the women were also asked to evaluate the process subjectively, analyzing its functional qualities as a learning method.[5] Now I will present some brief examples of the women's discourses in this stage of their biographies:

Yes, start your own business, its riskier, but that's all there is, and it also depends on . . . it works well for you, right? At least for me, it lets you organize yourself differently, it's not eight hours straight and having to leave the children at this person or that person's house, so, in that way, it's easier, you can do it more easily, but work that they hire you for . . . no, of course not, thing's are bad, but, well, if we can get ourselves started up in self-employment, set up our own business. Starting is always very bad because you can't manage it right away . . . but, anyway, little by little, things are going well, there are a lot of people living here and the village is getting better, it's a tiny village, but not so small as not to have anything (. . .) I'm trying to have a stable job, starting a small business, or at least trying to. (Informant, Carmen)

I'd like to work in the health sector, but, come on! Since I'm not prepared to do that, I wouldn't mind being in the administration (. . .) If someones says I could work as a salesperson in a shop or taking care of clients, I wouldn't mind that, either (. . .) (Informant, María)

Some barriers for starting to work . . . If you think about it, I don't have anything, no document that certifies any of the things I can do, and I think it's a vicious circle because, like I said, I'm in a bar because I know how to do that kind of work and I would prove it with the experience I have, but I can't even prove that because I wasn't insured, so it's hard to find work, very hard (silence). It's hard to be able to work because you have no experience, but if you don't work you'll never get any, and we always end up in the same place, it's always the same, you don't work because you don't have experience, and if they never hire you, you can never prove it. (Informant, Mercedes)

Three successive interviews were carried out with each of the women, lasting approximately an hour and a half each.

Prior to these interviews, the women were each contacted again, and the requirements and general approach of the research, what they would be asked to do, and the tasks they would need to undertake were explained and negotiated. Personal reflection was required, as well as personal interest and a commitment to the task. Thus, a cycle of biographical interviews began, where the person as a whole came into play. With the person's commitment to the research and a clear delimitation of the roles, *rapport* was established between the women and us. Information was gathered in the first interview, and was transcribed, coded, and analyzed in an exploratory manner before the next contact (the second interview), in an attempt to interpret the material and obtain elements to understand it for the next (third) interview. After the successive interviews, improvements in the process of carrying out the interviews which will, later, be shaped into histories, were made. Once the process was completed, rich qualitative material was available, which could then be analyzed in a global fashion. This material was given back to the participants through the partial reports made at the end of each biographical stage. Once this process was over, the women analyzed the final report globally. Using this analytic work, the women shared their biograms and life histories, they shared their experiences and desires, and they identified common barriers to job insertion that were the starting point for creating possible solutions to their situations of professional/life transition.

> For me, my spouse was an important barrier, well, my spouse and, specifically, marriage, because that's where all my problems came from, because he was a real male chauvinist and, it took me a long time to realice how I was living. (Informant, Aurora)

> (. . .) My lack of training . . . In the period when I grew up there were no opportunities for women, there were no economic resources, there were no means even in the villages, they were really backward. (Informant, Mercedes) Motherhood really made a mark on me, for good and for bad. I'm not sorry, but it's true that, since the responsibility was all mine, I had to quit my job and I haven't been able to start to study again until now, now that my children are grown up. (Informant, Carmen)

> (. . .) one problema I see is that we are hardly given any orientation about how to get a job, and also that there is not mucha id for women who want to start their own businesses. (Informant, Rosa)

Validating the Research . . . Beginning With Oneself, the Value of Subjective Experience

Although the women provided a lot of results that dealt with exploring and planning their professional/life trajectories in this research, (e.g., Suárez-Ortega, 2008, 2009a, 2009b),

we will describe the subjective evaluations of the process of working with them in this section. The process followed attempts to carry out the vocational development stages proposed by Pelletier (1986, 1995) with the women, stages that deal with exploring, crystallizing, identifying, and carrying out vocational development. The first stage focused on professional exploration. We worked with the women to identify their needs and necessary professional skills, to reorient their professional projects. Although the women developed more skills for professional exploration, this process was, according to them, a starting point for projecting their lives, an achievement in itself: "By thinking about myself, about my life, I am learning to plan what I want to do, to clarify my thinking. I have seen the connections between what has happened to me and my present situation, and I have been able to understand why I feel the need to change professionally now, as well as personally, because these aspects are related"(Focus group: women).

The women's subjective evaluation of their own processes contributed some methodological references for constructing women's projects. These processes helped us detect the women's strong need to relate to other people, people with whom they can talk and share their experiences and feelings. In this sense, the informants highlight that the way the researcher listened was positive, because it reflected the feeling of value that they have about their own lives when they are considered object of study. The time devoted to the interviews reinforced the informants' own feelings. These women's needs to establish relationships with other women and to have time for themselves and to encourage self-exploration were reflected: "This whole process has been very useful for me, because you can realize things on your own, but since you don't talk and think about them, since you don't reflect on them, you don't really become aware of how they influence certain aspects of your life. Nobody had shown so much interest in my own life, in how I had felt and in how I feel right now" (Focus group: women).

Doing the interviews and exploring specific aspects that the main characters valued gave them the chance to narrate, explore, and evaluate their life experiences. It also gave them the chance to become more aware of the life events they had experienced, and to give them meaning based on their own desires and expectations. In this sense, the interview process served to reinforce their decision-making and to understand their concerns and motivations regarding the world of work, linked to their life plan. The work carried out to select, describe, interpret, and analyze the meaningful milestones in these women's lives made it easier for them to become more coherent concerning their life trajectories, making them feel that they were in charge of their own lives. In addition, the analysis of their life trajectories allowed them to identify gender stereotypes and other conditioning factors, as well as some of their own self-limitations, and even detect possible sources of support for professional development. The processes of introspection and reflection,

together with detecting limiting and facilitating aspects of their careers, led them to become aware of the situations that they experienced and to move toward action more successfully: "I think that these interviews help you to clarify, to remember things that have happened to you, to understand them . . . they help you to think about what you really want in life, and if you're not really clear about your ideas, they give you clues that make you see things more clearly. They have also helped me to become aware of some of the aspects that were making my life difficult, as well as of people, centers, and resources that can help me to improve my future" (Focus group: women).

Throughout this process, it was important for the women to be able to project their own difficulties, fears, and uncertainties, and to perceive the researcher's complicity. Giving them a release for these difficulties let them become aware, little by little, of the situation they were experiencing, analyzing the situation from each woman's specific reality. It also served to give the women more confidence, become personally and professionally motivated, to make them wish to innovate and to do things differently from how they had done them in earlier life stages. The confidence the women gained in this process also allowed them to eliminate, little by little, resistance to change, to perceive change as possible, and to feel that their lives belonged to them, that they were in charge of their lives: "This process has stimulated me, it has encouraged me, I have been able to talk about things and share experiences with other women, and that makes you feel better about yourself, and makes you readier to change. Just talking does you good, it must be that I hadn't ever talked about such personal things . . ., and, also, you reflect a lot on what has happened to you, about what you want now, about what you would like change . . . I've learned, gotten to know myself better, and become motivated to do things, not just to think about doing them, because I have also realized that everything's not closed when you're forty years old, but that there are chances to do things" (Focus group: women).

The process they experienced allowed them to accept life the way it had been, verbalize it, interpret it, and rewrite it. They learned about themselves and they also developed the skills to identify needs and to make their life plan concrete, little by little. Vocational choice and decision-making played a relevant role, starting with the way they carried out the different life roles that they put into play. This generated satisfaction in these women and also facilitated the women's progress and self-determination: "Paths that help to reflect on life, which enable you to make sense of a lot of things that happen to you, discover things about yourselves, and also a way to learn that it is not just for now, but for other times, later." "Reflecting on my career and discovering valuable information about my life has made me feel satisfied with myself and more secure in my future decision-making" (Focus group: women).

Conclusions and Discussion

The biographical-narrative method has certain potentials to social and educative research, such as the following.

(1) The possibility of comparing macro and micro perspectives (Davies & Gannon, 2006), one of the limitations of quantitative research;

(2) A reflexive, dynamic, emergent, progressive design, that makes it possible to constantly create new forms of interaction and responsibility among the participants, and between the participants and the researcher, to generate an "open dialogue" (MacLure, 2001), and to contribute valid consensual responses to the object of study;

(3) The data-gathering techniques make possible descriptions and characterizations that are true to reality possible. Specifically, performance interviews (or stories) are characterized as a "reflexive, dialogic, or performance interview" (Brinkmann, 2011, p. 24), where people can manifest their desires, feelings, and *imaginaires* about their lives in a utopian way and create other possible forms of being and being in the world;

(4) People are not reduced to variables but rather considered as a whole. It makes it possible to know people and for people to know themselves, to understand the key points on which they have built their lives, as well as some of the most important references on which the present need for change rests;

(5) The life-history narrative method contributes to constructing individual and collective identity (Gonick, Walsh, & Brown, 2011). This is mainly due to the reflection that it involves. People who participate develop reflexive processes regarding their own existence and put their own desires and future projects into play, based on a past that characterized this existence;

(6) Reflection on one's own experience gives a person a sense of authorship regarding her life, leading her to become aware of it, to position herself, and to clarify her life-options (Ginette & Blanche, 2000). In this sense, it makes it easier for the individual to learn a constant person-environment adaptive, self-regulatory process, which can be used once it is learned, more and more autonomously, in each life transition.

(7) In addition, in the course of the research, the people who participated –including the researcher– modified their schema of thinking and acting (Tanggaard, 2009). Both parts intervene in recreating conversational reality, producing knowledge through the intersubjectivities put into play for

creating the discursive material: "In an emancipatory research project, participants' transformation will reflect the goal of the research" (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006, p. 1028). Brinkmann (2011) suggests that, far from a misunderstood "intrusion" by the researcher in the research, "its "intrusion" into the conversation is not thought of as a source of error, or as something unnatural. On the contrary, if knowledge and subjectivity are produced in conversations, it is an epistemic virtue to become visible as a questioner in the interview" (p. 72). This research process, according to Gómez, Puigvert, and Flecha (2011), generates possibilities of social transformation, as it identifies the elements that produce inequalities to improve women's realities.

(8) The analytic process carried out with these women can be transferred to other groups of adults with similar needs regarding professional development. Specifically, women's life paths, as well as conditioning factors and changes in the women, are examples that can be useful for other women who are in the transition. At any rate, we conclude that this method is useful when applied to learning and existential development (Suarez-Ortega, 2009b). To this end, the research should be done following a series of criteria suitable for more robust research, among which the following stand out: the significance of the information, the credibility, returning the data to those who have produced them, implication in the research process, the triangulation, subjects and times, and a functional use of the process of analysis and negotiation that responds to the object of study (Polkinghorne, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1986). Using this method, according to Ginette and Blanche (2000), "the participant not only makes his or her experience explicit in terms of learning, but can also transfer and modify the knowledge acquired to recognize it (use it) in other situations" (p. 193) Accordingly, if we use stories as a tool for understanding, negotiating, and transforming (Adams, 2008), a discussion on ethics regarding the narrative is indispensable, highlighting the importance of intersubjectivity for learning. With narrative, we legitimate life the way it happens and, for this, the researcher must always add performance and analysis of the narrative, considering the hegemonic culture of the reference context, the norms, the values, and the hidden elements that are the signs of identity of individual of people and of groups.

Finally, based on the women's voices, a series of educational recommendations should be adopted in the field of adult job orientation. The most relevant are the following. (a) Incorporate job training and, transversally, orientation for women for preparing professional and life projects because the research carried out has shown its benefits. (b) Continue the resources for job training that the women have attended, with the Job Administration making a clear and forceful effort toward job insertion for this group that is at risk of social exclusion. In my opinion, this requires a serious study of supply and demand in rural areas, detecting possible employment sites for women. It is also necessary to offer training that fits the profiles of insertion with the best job opportunities, and to accompany the women throughout the process of professional development through actions that orient them in their job search, actions that permit their empowerment (e.g., self-exploration, exploration of the professional context, decision-making, job-search techniques, and family, and professional life balance).

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Notes

1. The following works are noteworthy, in this sense: the work by F. Znaniecki and W. I. Thomas, *The Polish Peasant* (1918-1920), autobiographies such as those by Leo Simmons, *Sun Chief* (1942), and Oscar Lewis, *Los hijos de Sánchez* (1961), and Denzin's (1989) work, Interpretative Biography, which provided a reflection on narrative research, as well as a set of novel strategies in this field.

2. This leads us to situate ourselves in a pragmatic perspective regarding discourse, because discourses come from social practices and, as such, we must consider two different positions, "etic" and "emic" (Valles, 2006). In addition, these two positions have to do with that which is discursive and that which is extra-discursive, so that it is interesting to incorporate different data-gathering techniques to the research as a complement.

3. Authors such as Pujadas (2002) have referred to different concepts such as life-history or life account. The etymological meaning is used to clarify these terms. Thus, life story / *récits de vie* / *relato de vida* involves the retrospective narration that

the person herself presents, from her position as the main actor, of her life or certain episodes of her life, either by her own initiative or upon request by another person. Here, the story is exactly how the person himself tells it. Life history / *histoire de vie* / *historia de vida* places the emphasis on the researcher as the main agent in the case study of one or more people.

4. It is part of my Ph.D. research on "*The Construction of the Life-Work Project of Adult Women: A Challenge for the Guidance Process.*" This research was carried out at the end of 2006 at this university, developed as a biographical-narrative process.

5. See section "Validating the research."

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