

***WORKING ON FAMILY IN ADULT EDUCATION AND UNIVERSITY TEACHING FROM AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES.***

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**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper I address the use of auto/biographical methodology in adult education and higher education for working from an educational viewpoint on family roots and family. In my opinion, this use of family life stories is set in a critical and emancipatory model of lifelong learning and an epistemological model based on the co-construction of knowledge from the analysis of personal and social experience oriented by a complex and systemic perspective (see Freire, 1970; Gelpi, 2005; Formenti, 2000). Critical and experiential learning is a powerful heuristic concept for confronting adult learning. The paper explores some topics relevant to genealogical and generational questions, pointing out its sociological, anthropological and pedagogical implications. Concepts such as collective memory, social change, cultural transmission, cohort generation, family communication, self and identity are explored in relation to personal growth and lifelong learning. Also, I outline some features of a pedagogical model for working from an experiential an emotional framework in relation to personal and family remembering.

From a holistic perspective, life histories –oral and written narratives of people about lived experience, with its different procedures, aims and contexts- are consubstantial to human beings. In this sense, life histories are a universal anthropological feature, present in all cultures and stages of human development. Life histories are related to everyday life and cultural life (intergenerational practices of experiential transmission; intragenerational practices amongst pairs; anniversaries and commemorations; transitional moments; documents and objects, such as photographs and videos; elaboration of *curriculum vitae*; biographical and autobiographical

personal literature; audiovisual, movie and digital productions) (Pineau & Le Grand, 1996, 5-13). According to Pineau and Le Grand (1996, 3), life history is understood as “research and construction of meaning from personal temporal events”. The different constituent elements of life histories are included in this definition: people, temporality, meaning and, finally, the methodological subject.

Recovery of past and labour around individual and collective lived experience are highly topical subjects. This social environment saturated of personal and collective remembering –so many times hampered, manipulated, overused- is one of the defining characteristics of our present time (Ricouer, 2000, 67-163). In this culture of remembering –in which psychoanalysis, social sciences, literature and media concur- life histories are undergoing an extraordinary development (on memorial context and education, cf. Demetrio, 2003, 159-169).

Autobiographical methods have been used in education from the beginning of the eighties. From a biographical viewpoint subjects such as students, teachers, curriculum, adult learning, educational innovation, leadership, school time and space and so have been studied. Research on teachers is an important area, focused on everyday life, learning of profession, cycles of teaching career, teacher thinking, attitudes on educational change, curriculum development, in-service training and professional development (cf. Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; González Monteagudo, 1996a, 1996c; Goodson, 1992; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Zabalza, 1988). In the Anglo-Saxon educational setting, the first applications of biographical methods are related to pre-service and in-service teacher education and teacher development (for a review, González Monteagudo, 1996c, 2000). The starting point of the use of life histories in education in the French-speaking context is related to Gaston Pineau, author strongly interested in life histories as an instrument of experiential learning of adults. With other educators interested in this approach (such as P. Dominicé, G. de Villers, G. Bonvalot, B. Courtois, C. Josso, J.-L. Le Grand and other), Pineau has animated the network ASIHVIF (*Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation*) for more than 20 years. This group, based in Paris (France), is very interested in adult education, self-directed learning and lifelong learning focused on auto/biographical work from an existential, qualitative and radical viewpoint (Coulon & Le Grand, 2000; Dominicé, 2000; Lainé, 1998; Pineau, 1998, 2000; Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983; Pineau & Le Grand, 1996). In the last few years, attention to auto/biographical methods in education has also been devoted in Italy, with contributions by D. Demetrio (1996, 2003) and L. Formenti (1996, 1998, 2002, 2004) among others.

## **1. LIFE HISTORY IN ADULT EDUCATION: OUTLINES OF A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL**

Adult educators have found in life histories a methodology for learning (and also for researching) with a strong potential in order to foster a situated and democratic learning. In the last 25 years this approach has been used in very different contexts: writing workshops, higher education, associations, youth groups, women groups, immigrants and ethnic minorities, accrediting prior learning, workers, adult learners, educators, social workers, and so on.

In 1983 G. Pineau published, in collaboration with Marie-Michèle, *Produire sa vie. Autoformation et autobiographie* (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983; for our discussion, see pp. 179-190 and 383-391), a stimulating and innovative book, authentic starting point of life histories in adult education. Pineau works the concepts of self-directed learning and life history, so far conceived as not related fields, and explains the need for developing the education of adults from the use of life histories as an instrument of research and teaching. This approach has important implications for the change of roles of researcher, educator, and adult learner, aimed to the criticism of hierarchical models. Criticising subjectivism, individualism and liberalism, Pineau points out self-directed learning as appropriation of the own education by the adult, within a democratic, experiential, critical and liberatory perspective. It is necessary to talk and write on the own life. The autobiography, until now a privilege of the learned elites, should become democratic and accessible to people. Life history is not only a method of knowledge but also of social action, within a militant and engaged approach.

“Life histories –we read in a document of ASIHVIF- try to enhance the power of action of the person on himself/herself and on the environment, associating him/her to the construction of produced knowledge” (ASIHVIF, 2005, 2). The models of research and intervention are qualitative, transdisciplinary and collaborative. It is unequivocally rejected the gap among disciplines and the collaboration among educators, researchers and learners is promoted in all phases of the process.

In order to exemplify how life histories are worked within this group –and without forgetting the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches employed by the members of ASIHVIF- we are presenting the works by P. Dominicé (2000, 2002), undertaken in Geneva, with students in the Faculty of Sciences of Education and with adult educators in a non university context. The activity consists of a voluntary seminar focused on educational biography carried out in a weekly session during two university semesters. The aim is to work the own

educational biography, from orality and writing, mixing together individual and group work. Students prepare a first oral narrative, presented before their group and subsequently discussed. Then, students write their educational biography, based on the oral narrative, group discussions and written notes taken during the teaching sessions. In order to foster participation, implication and construction of meaning by the group, each student is asked to read, interpret and orally comment the biography of one of his/her classmates. Finally, the process is evaluated through a writing report by each student in which it is specified the knowledge produced through the process from the personal, procedural and cognitive dimensions.

Dominicé (2000, 16 and 26) comments that firstly he tried to use life histories as a strategy for researching adult learning, but he was soon shocked by the educational possibilities of biographical work, starting its use with students. Dominicé also points out the adult learners get fascinated with this methodology that deals with the history of personal life from a holistic outlook. Educational biography provides a very intense sense of immediacy, dynamism, cooperation, subjectivity and implication. It is also a very motivating activity for promoting writing and discussing on production, communication and applicability of knowledge. During the learning process storytellers keep the control on the process and the product of the activity. Theory and practice are related reciprocally. Researchers, educators and adult learners establish, from lived experience, a democratic, horizontal and existential relationship. People play a leading role in their education. As Dominicé writes, “we are not educated until we can give meaning to our education –in some ways we are not educated until we can educate ourselves” (Dominicé, 2000, 80).

Life histories help the exploration of personal and family world from a free and subjective perspective, within an interpersonal framework, facing the subject to his/her conflicts and favouring a positive resolution to conflicts, in the perspective of what Ricoeur (2000) has called a *happy remembering*. Auto/biographical methods are a way to access to experiential, subjective, affective and reminiscent pedagogical work. Personal narratives help the expression of feelings, and at the same time they sensitize people to the feelings of each others, increasing empathy and tolerance. Life histories contribute to the production of grounded, experiential and dialectic knowledge, derived from the ongoing interplay among theory, research, learning process, and personal and group experience (cf. Pineau, 1983; Pineau & Le Grand, 1996; Josso, 2000; Dominicé, 2000).

## **EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

Now I consider some ideas on learning with the aim of relating experiential subjectivity and critical, social engagement. Later I will return to family genealogical work and its implications for teaching and personal development from an auto/biographical perspective. My purpose is similar to that of Wilma Fraser when she speaks of facilitating “individual empowerment whilst not losing sight of broader social issues” (Fraser, 1995, 5). Experiential learning and communicative interaction is the base for learning and change. For me, experiential learning, a notion grounded in John Dewey, David Kolb and Malcolm Knowles, is very interesting because supposes, as Fraser explains (1995, 4-23) a challenge to post-school structures and curricula, combining individual development and social change.

I think of learner as a subject that knows, without reifying or acritically legitimizing that knowledge. Learning means integration of processes. As points out D. Kolb (cit. in Fraser, 1995, 6), “learning and change result from the integration of concrete emotional experiences with cognitive processes: conceptual analysis and understanding”. Through learning, the adult symbolically travels from dependence to autonomy, from passivity to activity, from selfishness to altruism, from self-rejection to self-acceptance, from imitation to originality, from narrow interests to broad interests (Fraser, 1995, 9). It is necessary to locate subjective experience within a wider social context, developing a more critical approach to topics such as identity, difference and student voice (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997, 42-44; Freire, 1970; Gelpi, 2005). In this perspective, sharing autobiographical writings and oral accounts in small groups often promotes support and understanding as participants reflect on their lives, in an informal atmosphere of free exchange (Aminoff, 1995).

## **EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF PERSONAL AND FAMILY STORIES**

Traditionally education has been conceived as mere instruction and transmission of objective knowledge as a result. In more recent times, important changes in social context, educational policies and pedagogical methods have helped a better way of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, education, including some sectors of adult education, has continued to be above all a rationalistic and cognitive process. The affective, emotional and interpersonal dimensions have largely been underestimated. This panorama is congruent with the patriarchal system, based on authority, hierarchy and rationalism (Naranjo, 1993, 2004).

The concepts of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence, emotional intelligence, emotional education and emotional literacy, conceived in the eighties and made popular in the

nineties of the past century, have contributed to question the traditional and conventional model of educational practice (Goleman, 1995, 1999; Bisquerra, 2001; 2003; Steiner, 2003; Marina, 2004). Particularly, the concept of emotional intelligence, popularized with great success by Goleman (1995, 1999) one decade ago, has produced a strong impact on society, companies, schools and families. Nowadays it is usual to hear speaking about emotional education, affective education, interpersonal education, education of feelings, emotional literacy, and education for self-knowledge and education for social abilities (for a review, see Bisquerra, 2001; on past and how to cope with it positively, see Seligman, 2005, 103-132).

According to Steiner (2003, 34), “emotional education consists of three skills: the skill to understand emotions, the skill to express them in a fruitful way, and the skill to listen to everybody and to feel empathy in relation to their emotions”. Self-understanding implies, among other things, “an activity of reminiscence, which involves a contact, through remembering, with the past experience; this retrospective clarification is stimulated by the written and oral expression” (Naranjo, 2004, 185).

From my perspective, emotional education should be pervaded by a critical and emancipatory approach. In the last few years, under the influence of market and efficiency, emotional intelligence –and all what has been derived from this field in relation to education– runs the risk of turning “... in another lubricant of corporate human engineering used to help companies to identify optimist dreamers and to avoid sad lunatics” (Steiner, 2003, 13). It is revealing, in relation to this danger, the Goleman’s approach (1999) in his book devoted to emotional intelligence applied to business. With an apparently neutral perspective, Goleman applies the concept of emotional intelligence to the world of companies, accepting implicitly the status quo. In this book, the relevant educational question is this: “How can we educate our children for the coming labour market?” (Goleman, 1999, 426).

From a pedagogical viewpoint, emotional education should be at the service of an open, experiential, democratic and constructivist model. This implies that emotional education clash with closed and neutral pedagogical programmes, created to be used regardless of specific students, educators and contexts.

Autobiographical learning is very fruitful for working with the past, elaborating conflicts and crises and therefore as a useful instrument for emotional and interpersonal education. The guided writing of educational autobiography (on guided autobiography, see Mader, 1995), that we have been using with university students, helps work in depth around personal and family

world of students, integrating and creating skills in cognitive, operative, and affective dimensions (cf. Marina, 2004, 59-62). Work with oral and written personal narratives improves self-knowledge as well as a more mature approach to problems, difficulties, crises and interpersonal relationships. Exploration on past, family experience, and formal and informal educational itineraries, is an excellent way for working identity. “The idea that reflection on the personal past, and through it acceptance of change, might be essential to the maintenance of self-identity through the typical transformations of the cycle-life...” (Thompson, 2000, 184).

## **2. FAMILY STORIES**

In the last few years, more attention has been paid to the family stories by anthropologists, sociologists and oral historians (for a general overview, Miller, 2000). Generations and generational differences, genealogical charts, social and occupational mobility, diachronic analysis of divergent types of family, family narratives, and aging, are some of the subjects dealt with by these scholars. According to Miller (2000, 10-18), there are three approaches in biographical research on family: realist, neo-positivist, and narrative. This paper is situated within the narrative approach, with a specific focus on educational uses of family narratives.

Auto/biographical work on family starts out with the exploration of family roots. The analysis of family genealogy makes possible to situate the personal story in a larger context. This analysis has two main dimensions. One aspect is related with social and cultural context of the different generations (the ‘target’ individual, his/her parents, his/her grandparents, and, if it is the case, his/her children). Diachronic and synchronic comparison is a basic element of this biographical activity. Also it is important the research on differences of all kinds: generational, social, economic, political, cultural, ethnic, educational, axiologic and religious. The second aspect is linked to the adult’s subjective narrative frame. Here the oral and written stories of adults become important by evocating the lived experiences from a subjective, existential, controversial stance. The union of both sides in the same educational methodology explain, in my opinion, the potential of auto/biographical approach for encouraging the construction of a historic, cultural, social knowledge, that it is at the same time personal, subjective and even healing (see Formenti, 2002; Demetrio, 2002).

Reflection about the family group of adult learner is developed from these aspects (always as a open script: a) home considered as physical space; attribution of meaning to the

spaces and places of home; narratives on daily objects of home; the communicative dynamic of family, characterized by specific interpersonal relations, that it is possible study from an ecological and systemic perspective; the emotional world of families and the attitudes toward feelings; d) the analysis of use of time by the different members of the family, as well its evolution during the life span; the symbolic and spiritual universe prevalent in the family; f) leadership, power and management of conflicts; g) family transformations and changes in function of social and cultural evolution; h) perspectives on future and open questions for working.

Family life stories use orality and writing, individual and social activity. They combine subjectivity and objectivity, story and interpretation, production of sociocultural knowledge and development of self-knowledge, research on existing “reality” and search for change of personal and collective dimensions. From my view auto/biographical learning is a good instrument for integrating in lifelong learning subjective experience and openness to a complex and uncertain sociocultural world. Finally, life histories combine research and education, helping educators can become engaged (researchers) actors in favour of a democratic and dialogic educational practice.

It is difficult to think about self or identity independently of family story and setting. “Family stories seem to persist in importance even when people think of themselves individually, without regard to their familial roles. The particular human chain we’re part of is central to our individual identity” (E. Stone, cit. in Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 420). But it is true that individual and family stories are enmeshed in a complex network of larger stories we live within, such as stories related to community, creed, culture, class, nation, politics, and ethnicity (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, 85-89). Family story is a point of intersection between personal and social story. “The personal experience of autobiographical memory is organized through socially shared resources. We draw on cultural meanings and language to shape our memories and to provide a framework for remembering” (Coffey, 1999, 127).

From a relational and systemic perspective, Laura Formenti writes that “family memory may be understood as a specific way of knowledge, almost imprinted in our bodies and consciences, used for giving shape and meaning as well as for explaining and sometimes legitimize our self and social identity... Family stories co-create reality and identity of family system and of its members” (Formenti, 2002, 38-39). Collective memories are the expression of a common family identity. Family is a network of social support and a setting of intergenerational encounter where the adults broaden their vital horizons making a bridge toward

past (the grandparents' generation) and future (the children's generation) (Palacios y Rodrigo, 1998, 35). Traditionally, family stories have belonged to the women sphere (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, 7), even though social change in the last few decades is changing this traditional role of women within family structure.

Family memory has three main functions, according to A. Muxel (cit. in: Gaulejac, 1999; 151-153; Formenti, 2002, 56-59; Castaignos-Leblond, 2001, 170): (1) a function of transmission, mobilizing the memory for setting the person's story within the genealogical and symbolic bonds of family lineage as a whole, within which self-recognition is feasible. This is the genealogical register related with filiation; (2) a function of reviviscence, through the affective, emotional elaboration of past experiences. This is the affective register, shaped by the network of intimate relationships; and (3) a function of reflection through the critical assessment of personal development, linking past, present and possibilities for the future. This is the narrative register, enabling to distance from social and affective influences.

The concept of generation is crucial for understanding the work with family stories within a complex frame characterized by a strong emphasis on structural dimensions related to society, culture and history. Miller (2000, 29-30) distinguishes two meanings of generation. Generation is made up of an individual and his / her siblings; in this sense, generation is concerned with socialization, the transmission of values within the family and the inheritance of wealth. A second meaning of generation refers to a block of people born during a specific span of years that are considered distinct from those who precede or come after them (aggregate, cohort, and cohort generation), living similar historical events or experiences that affect the individuals born during the same time. Working with family history charts and constructing tables from these family history charts, Miller (2000, 44-60) offers a path for researching in sociology close to Bertaux's approach.

According to Castaignos-Leblond (2001 169-186), the concept of generation is related to (1) age of people, (2) filiation, and (3) epoch. Being member of a generation enables to the subject to establish a position between predecessors and successors. To belong to a generation is to become an actor of history. According to Rindfleisch (cit. in Miller, 2000, 30), "a cohort generation is a group of persons born during a limited span of years who share a common and distinct social character shaped by their shared experiences through time".

Now I need to present some ideas and concepts developed by Vincent de Gaulejac, a French psycho sociologist, working with a genealogical approach. His work has had important

relevance both in the theory and in the practice. At the crossroads of sociology, psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the Gaulejac's psychosocial approach, named "Family romance and social trajectory" (Gaulejac, 1987, 1999), explores, from different verbal and non verbal tools, participants' family history and personal trajectory, always characterized by the split between the power of wishes and the need for socialization. Family is a place of transmission at different levels: transmission of life (biological register); of a name, a culture, an education, an heritage (anthropological register); of narcissist wishes (psychic register).

Gaulejac applied this approach in seminars. There is a permanent interplay between personal implication and theoretical analysis. The participants in the seminars are usually professionals engaged in interpersonal work: sociologists, psychotherapists, social workers, teachers, psychiatrists, architects, health professionals, counselors). Vincent de Gaulejac proposes four techniques to work social trajectory and family romance (a Freudian concept, *Familienroman* in German): genealogical tree, picture of the parental project, analysis of social trajectories and sociodramatic performances (Gaulejac, 1987, 266-267, 277-283; Lainé, 1998, 275-276).

The seminars animated by Gaulejac and collaborators explore theoretically and practically these topics: family genealogy, from which depend on cultural, economic, ideological and affective "heritage"; the formation of parental project; family romance and its relation with family stories and social context; life choices and turning points (professional, political, ideological, emotional experiences); events making the social trajectory and its relations to social changes. There are two different levels in the genealogical work: (1) a descriptive level, expression of lived, subjective experience; (2) an analytic level, "choral" reflection on lived experience (analysis developed in groups, through the implication of researchers, teachers and participants).

### **3. FAMILY AUTO/BIOGRAPHY AND EDUCATION**

In my opinion, to apply auto/biographical methods in lifelong learning is an innovative solution in view of the increasing impasse of conservative adult educational programs and politics as well as the confusion of many teachers. So, adult educators have found in life histories a methodology for learning (and also for researching) with a strong potential in order to foster a situated and democratic learning. In the last 25 years this approach has been used in very different contexts: writing workshops, higher education, associations, youth groups, women

groups, immigrants and ethnic minorities, accrediting prior learning, workers, adult learners, educators, social workers, and so on. Mixing cooperation, work from experience, and self-directed learning, auto/biographical methods can help to enhance the power of action of the person on himself/herself and on the environment, associating him/her to the construction of produced knowledge. This approach is qualitative, transdisciplinary and collaborative. It is rejected the gap among disciplines. The partnership among educators, researchers and learners in all phases of the process is promoted (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983; Dominicé, 2000; González Monteagudo, 2006b).

Auto/biographical work on family starts with the exploration of family roots. The analysis of family genealogy makes possible to situate the personal story in a larger context. This analysis has two main dimensions. One aspect is related with social and cultural context of the different generations (the 'target' individual, his/her parents, his/her grandparents, and, if it is the case, his/her children). Diachronic and synchronic comparison is a basic element of this biographical activity. Also it is important to research on differences of all kinds: generational, social, economic, political, cultural, ethnic, educational, axiologic and religious. The second aspect is linked to the adult's subjective narrative frame. Here the oral and written stories of adults become important by evocating the lived experiences from a subjective, existential, controversial stance. The union of both sides in the same educational methodology explain, in my opinion, the potential of auto/biographical approach for encouraging the construction of a historic, cultural, social knowledge, that it is at the same time personal, subjective and even healing (see Formenti, 2002; Demetrio, 2002).

The interview is a good instrument for collecting data about the members of family. Interviewing is an easy way of introducing adult learners to research and fieldwork, connecting formal learning to experiences lived in personal, family and social sectors. In order to explore family experiences, it is useful to facilitate to adult learners some orientations on selected topics deserving attention. Thompson (2000, 309-323), from the perspective of an oral historian, proposes this general elements in his life story interview guide: general information; grandparents' generation; parents' generation; siblings/cousins/uncles/aunts; daily life in childhood; community and class; school; employment; leisure and courting; marriage and children; changing daily life; later life. Atkinson (1998, 39-53) suggests to search for information on these general aspects: birth and family of origin; cultural setting and traditions; social factors; education; love and work; historical events and periods; retirement; inner life and spiritual

awareness; major life themes; vision of the future; and closure questions. Finally, from a sociological gaze, Miller (2000, 62-68) advises to work on significant social and historical processes affecting family life: socio-economic changes; the move to cities and other alteration in migration patterns; changes in state social policy; demographic changes; patterns of the transfer of material wealth between generations (inheritance); the effect of parents; broken marriages and 'post-modern' family structures; the interactions between siblings' trajectories; changes in social relationships over time; and collective memories.

Reflection on adult learner's family group is developed from these aspects (always as an open script: a) home considered as a physical space; attribution of meaning to the spaces and places of home; narratives on daily objects of home; structure of family communication, characterized by specific interpersonal relationships, framed in an ecological and systemic perspective; family emotional world and attitudes toward feelings; d) analysis of use of time by the different members of family, as well its evolution during the life span; symbolic and spiritual universe prevalent in the family; f) leadership, power and management of conflicts; g) family transformations and changes in function of social and cultural evolution; h) perspectives on future and open questions for working.

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