

## LIFE HISTORIES, EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION.

In the last three decades we have been living decisive transformations that are radically altering different sectors of human life. In economy there are new forms of production, distribution and consumption, characterized by globalization on a worldwide scale. The new forms of organization of all the economic cycle, based on information technologies and ruthless and aggressive *management*, have revolutionized the traditional concepts with regards to labor relationships. Unemployment, precarious employment, labor insecurity, low salaries and the delocalization of companies with profits have spread everywhere<sup>1</sup>. In the political sphere, in the last 20 years, we have witnessed important events: the downfall of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc countries, the loss of legitimacy in representative democracies, the crisis of the nation-state, the emergence of new focuses of conflict and violence, the development of the so-called *preventative* wars and the fundamentalist policy of *War on terror*, the reconfiguration of supranational political and military blocks, the increase of poverty and the growing political and military recovery of Islam from an extremist and violent point of view. Another important phenomenon, at the same time with economical, political and cultural dimensions, is the increase of migrations, favored by poverty in the countries of origin and by the economic and cultural globalization. The recent ascertainment of global warming is creating an even more acute awareness of the difficulties of our historical moment (Castells, 1997 & 2003; Beck, 1998).

Advances in information and communication technologies, the transport revolution, and the irrepressible progress of biotechnological and biomedical research are placing us in a society that is different with respect to that of half a century ago. Cultural and ideological globalization produces a homogenization of awareness. Identity and cultural and leisure consumption are mediated by powerful and influential economical and media-based structures. The *industry of awareness* nowadays operates in a refined, subtle and covert manner. As a consequence of all this, socialization, learning, interpersonal relationships and identity suffer a process of strong reconfiguration in an environment characterized by reflexivity, uncertainty and relativism. In this changing socio-cultural framework, people are called upon to develop an intense work of *biographization* to give a meaning to their lives and courses. In the new setting of late and liquid modernity, people have to construct their courses with a greater degree of autonomy, and in a less traditional environment (Alheit & Dausien, 2007; Delory-Momberger, 2003; Gergen, 1991; West, Alheit, Andersen & Merrill, 2007).

### 2. ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT DEBATES OF LIFEHISTORY APPROACHES.

Life histories, when conceived from a broad and holistic perspective – that is, the narratives of human beings around lived-out experience, with its various forms, procedures, aims and contexts - are consubstantial to human beings. They thus make up a universal anthropological fact that is present in all the cultures and stages of life in historical evolution (Vansina, 1967). As Pineau and Le Grand indicate (1996, 5-13), life stories are part of the daily experience of intergenerational and intragenerational transmission and of cultural life experiences

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years and in spite of having overcome the cold war period, there is growing uncertainty, lack of trust, pessimism and worldwide tension. The Twin Towers attack (11 of September 2001), and those of Madrid and London, the latest war in Iraq, the increase in the price of oil, the growing awareness of the threat of an ecological disaster if measures are not taken against global warming, the social and ethical implications of techno-scientific advances (particularly in biogenetics), the incapacity of countries and international organisms to solve the major conflicts, the increase in immigration within states ( especially the moving of millions of people from rural areas to the cities of the large emerging countries, such as China and India) and between states (in the case of Spain, some 5 million immigrants in the last 12 years), are all elements that are clear signs of the uncertainty that surrounds us. The economic, financial and real estate crisis of recent years has had, and is going to continue having, a huge impact. In the case of my country, Spain, the unemployment rate was in 2011 about 21% of the active population.

such as commemorations, collective life histories, personal biographical and autobiographical literature and audiovisual, cinematographic and digital productions. Currently, and from a more specific and also more specialized perspective, life histories – biographical methods, autobiographical focuses, personal narrations, personal documents and life stories – are, according to the *Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation*, experiences of research, training and intervention guided by an innovative and emancipatory aim that mean to combine the individual work of the subjects narrating their own life with the collective dimension typical of human beings. As far as research is concerned, the aim is the production of knowledge. With respect to training, the goal sought is to contribute to the subjects giving meaning to their own lives. Regarding intervention, the objective is to contribute to people involving themselves in social action (ASIHVIF, 2005, 15-16). Life histories are understood as “research and construction of meaning from temporal personal facts” (Pineau & Le Grand, 1996, 5). In this brief definition appear the major elements that make up life histories: people, temporality, meaning and the methodological question.<sup>2</sup>

Insofar as qualitative research methodology is concerned, the focus of life histories appears as an alternative to positivism and experiment-based social research and statistical surveys. In the strict sense of a social research technique, life histories appear in the 20th. century with the Chicago School sociology and the anthropological studies of P. Radin and others. The biographical focus was much used in the area of Anthropology to study aboriginal culture and that of the native tribes of North America (Pujadas, 1992; Langness, 1965, 3-18). Some anthropologists began gathering life histories from some chiefs of Indian tribes, facing the imminent perspective of the gradual disappearance of these groups. The two major questions initially dealt with from the biographical perspective in Anthropology were cultural change and the relationship between culture and personality features. The processes of deviation and social marginalization, the analysis of roles, values, the process of socialization and the cultural description were studied later. After World War II there was a falling off of the interest of anthropologists in biographical studies, within a scientist environment dominated by positivist methods. However, in the 70s, the pioneering work of Oscar Lewis meant the reappearance of interest in biographical focuses. Lewis, rejecting the quantitative method, opted for participative observation and in-depth interviews to gather life histories of poor rural and urban families in Mexico and Puerto Rico. It was a matter of stories of crossed lives and with a polyphonic structure, given that the different family members narrated their life in common, placing their vital, unexpected events in a social and historical context. *The Children of Sanchez*, the most popular book of Lewis (1961), contributes to the legitimizing of a manner of carrying out more holistic, subjective and open Anthropology focused on the intensive study of a family group. Lewis gave a voice to the poor of the countryside and of marginalized city areas and popularized these lives from the oral discourse of the subjects without conceptual or disciplinary mediating.

In the field of sociology (Ferrarotti, 1983; Peneff, 1990, 35-68; Plummer, 2001, 103-117), life histories began their life linked to the Chicago School and, specifically, to *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, by Thomas and Znaniecki, published in 5 volumes between 1918 and 1921. These authors considered personal documents as the most suitable sociological material for research. Using autobiographies, letters and other personal documents, they offered a canonic example of how to carry out sociological research. Thomas and Znaniecki (2004) set out the relationship between what they call the *social values* (that is, the objective cultural elements of social life) and the *attitudes* (that is to say, the subjective characteristics of the social actors). A process of bidirectional influence was produced between the social values and the attitudes. The sociologists of Chicago studied, between 1920 and 1945, urban life, social change, interculturality, gangs, poverty, prostitution, delinquency, violence and other topics from biographical focuses, particularly via the use of autobiography, written by the subject upon the request of the investigator. For the Chicago School, the aim of the research was the specific experience, understood as permanent social flow and characterized by ambiguity and subjectivity. In the Chicago studies, we find a triple focus of interest: the historical and evolutionary explanation of the lives of people, groups or social units; the development of the theory; and the methodological problems. As took place with Anthropology, Sociology recuperated the methods of life histories from the 70s. The publication in 1959 of *The Sociological Imagination*, by C. W Mills, was an important element in revitalizing life stories. In

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<sup>2</sup> Langness (1965, 4-5) defines life histories as “the extensive registering of the life of a person, told by him or herself, by other people or by both procedures, both adopting the written form and being the result of holding interviews with the subject”. Pujadas (1992, 47-48) understands by life history “the autobiographical story, obtained by the interviewer via successive interviews, in which the aim is to show the subjective testimony of a person and in which both the events and the appraisal are depicted...”. Denzin (1989, 7) states that the biographical method is “the use and duly-studied collection of personal documents that describe decisive moments in individual lives”. Concerning the problem of definitions, see Le Grand, 2000.

this innovative methodological testament, Mills settled scores with the North American academic sociology of the time –abstract empiricism- and denounced its jargon and fascination with figures. Mills claimed the need to place social research at the intersection point between history, social structures and biography. From the 70s, life histories began to gain in importance.

From the 1970s and 1980s, life histories transcended the realistic and interactionist focuses typical of the first half of the 20th. Century and began to become more important, adopting a great variety of forms. In this resurgence of what is biographical, the work of the sociologist D. Bertaux (1981, 1997) was very important. He introduced research into European sociology via life histories. Along with realist and interactionist focuses, more novel approaches started to appear. The crisis of functionalism, structuralism, behaviorism and, in general, of experimental focuses, favored the development of various qualitative paradigms: action-research, ethnography, discourse analysis, interactionism, phenomenology and life histories. A new, more subjective, narrative, dialoguing and implicative sensitivity began to permeate social research. At the base of these alternative paradigms we have to place the so-called interpretative, linguistic and narrative shift. In the area of cultural psychology, Bruner (1991) has shown a lively interest in the narrative construction of reality. On the other hand, the influential work of P. Ricoeur (1985, 1990, 2000) culminated in a profound reflection about human temporality, memory and narrative identity from the perspective of hermeneutic philosophy. With the contributions of C. Geertz, anthropology began to become more postmodern, understanding culture from the perspective of meaning and the interpreting of anthropological theories in connection with their authors. One of his works, dedicated to the anthropologist as author (Geertz, 1989), has brought about an interpretive shift towards the problem related to the authorship of ethnographic texts, a theme we will develop with more detail in the last part of our article. This trend of anthropology, continued by a group of young anthropologists with a postmodern orientation, has placed in the foreground of anthropological analysis the interest in the biographical aspects of the ethnographic production (cf. the essays brought together in Clifford and Marcus, 1986). With M. Foucault (1990), the suspicion about the social and discursive functions of the hermeneutics of the subject formed a critical argument that favored the discussion about the ideological and normative uses of biographical work. From the 80s (in the case of Spain, my country, with a certain delay due to the dictatorship of General Franco), the university community began to integrate new research styles into the Academy.

The qualitative view was developed in Anthropology, Sociology, Pedagogy, Psychology and Oral History. We moved into a highly pluralistic moment of social research. The postmodern, postfoundationalist and poststructuralist perspectives gained a progressive legitimacy. Feminist research began to be valued. German hermeneutics, North American pragmatism, French poststructuralism and neomarxist critical theory also became important. Currently, along with the postpositivist style of working on life histories typical of some oral historians and sociologists (cf. Bertaux, 1997), poststructural approaches in their literary, feminist, critical and foucauldian versions are giving rise to very innovative works. What we are seeing in the last twenty years is the questioning of the classic and restrictive concept of social research, as well as the coming together of social research and literary fiction.

The recuperating of the past and work around lived-out, individual and collective experiences make up topics that are permanently current, that are reflected daily in the mass media and in the major social debates. Discussions about memory and its historical, political, symbolic and personal function are countless (Ricoeur, 2000; Todorov, 1995; Roberts, 2002, 134-150; Bárcena & Mélich, 2000). Archives and centers to rescue, organize and document the oral and written patrimony that is not the concern of traditional archives abound. The places of memory are an important feature of our period. The recuperating of the historical memory is bringing about the creating of research and documentation centers. In Spain there is work going on to recuperate the history of the vanquished in the Civil War and the victims of Franco's regime. Even the government of the country has set up a law about historical memory that declares the right to family and personal memory in the context of supporting the victims of Franco's dictatorship. In Morocco, the victims and prisoners of the so-called *years of lead* appear in the press and on television, telling of the torture undergone and identifying, with their names in full, their executioners who are out walking free. In South Africa and in different Latin American countries, truth committees have published horrifying reports that include the detailed enumeration of crimes, torture, raping and other repugnant acts committed or, at least, inspired by the governments and, at times, by groups in the opposition. These reports mean to recuperate the truth of what happened, and at the same time establish the bases for reconciliation, for the difficult forgiveness or forgetting. This social climate saturated with personal and collective memory- so often impeded, manipulated, and abusively carried out – is one of the definitive features of our historical moment (Ricoeur, 2000, 67-163; Todorov, 1995). In this culture of memory

and remembrance – in which psychoanalysis, social sciences, literature and the mass media converge- life histories experience an extraordinary development as a useful source to work on the historical memory and on testimony (Beverley, 2000).

The recuperating of the historical memory starts out normally from an associative, restless and rebellious weave that promotes collective work and the building of knowledge from situations, problems and life experiences of great social and personal meaning. These initiatives, linked to social movements and to popular education, tend to be structured in the form of collective life histories (Coulon & Le Grand, 2000; Brun, 2001; Gaulejac & Legrand, 2008). Among the productions carried out, we find collective books, leaflets, artistic exhibitions, debates, plays, videos, audiovisual installations and web pages. Among the topics worked on one must mention the recuperating of the past, the situation of women, traditions, festivities, the world of work, and traumatic situations linked with wars, prisons and conflicts. The importance of the life histories of political militants, trade unionists, immigrants, the social marginalized, workers and women stand out for their powerful evocative strength. In this area of social testimony we find the best examples of democratic and horizontal collaboration between academics and social actors (Beverley, 2000). Here we also find the best samples both of the democratizing potential of the biographic-narrative genre and its inescapable ethical and political character .

Lately, here has been notable progress in the narrative component of educational theory, in tune with progressive epistemological pluralism (Bárcena & Mèlich, 2000). Traditionally, educational theory has been made up of and legitimized with respect to the narrative ways of knowledge (cf. Bruner, 1991). Theory could not arise from the stories. The university experts of social sciences, including those of the world of education, have shown a strong distrust towards all types of narrative. In this new intellectual climate it turns out to be appropriate to demand autographic writing in which pedagogues, traditionally considered as distant from theory, such as Pestalozzi, Makarenko, Neill and Freinet (Puig, 1993) constructed their own, genuine voice.

### **3. EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A TOOL FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND REFLEXIVITY.**

To write one's own autobiography is something surprising and pleasant. It also tends to be, paradoxically, a difficult task that is experienced with fear, anxiety and a worrying uncertainty. The narrator is faced with the writing of his own life, which is a task that is undertaken almost always for the first time, without previous experiences or attempts. Personal writing is not easy and sparks off an unavoidable existential questioning that breaks with the sureness and conventions of one's own existence. The initial attitudes connected with autobiographical writing vary a great deal from one person to another. The framework within which the task is carried also has an influence. The autobiographer imposes on himself some limitations connected with, for example, the potential readers of the personal narrative, especially in institutional contexts (training, work reintegration, the validation of skills, etc.). In the end, the result is positively valued, as the narrator perceives that he has un-covered himself, that he has explored forgotten or unknown territories, that he has achieved a new and more complete understanding of himself, that he has comprehended the powerful influences of families, communities and cultures on his history and his person better. Narrators usually conclude their task valuing the written narrative as a legacy, worthy of being transmitted to those close to them, even to their future children. In other cases, they mention the unfinished nature of the autobiography and make resolutions to continue writing in the future. They speak of the need to study it in depth, of not having enough time to produce a more complete story, one with a greater dedication and without urgency and the tasks of university studies. In my experience in recent years, my attention has been strongly drawn to the power of writing as a tool of self-knowledge, exploration, training, awareness, empathy and conflict-solving. Moreover, one must take into account that it is a question of a low-cost tool - actually free – that is easy to use, adaptable to very different contexts and that can be carried out under supervision or autonomously, in a presential manner and also at a distance or using new technologies. It is a tool that makes a person maturer and favours a better understanding of others. Without essentialising or acritically reifying the use of autobiographical narrations, the question that occurs to me is why its use is not more widespread - and here I am referring to the Spanish context, in which autobiographical methodologies are experiencing a slow and limited development.

Autobiography makes it possible to explore the past and the present of the autobiographer in the framework of the family, of the local community and the widest institutional and sociocultural contexts. As a training instrument, autobiography favours: self-knowledge, the ability to analyze the past; the setting up of connections between the experience lived, the present and future projects; and the identification of the most important factors that condition the personal and educational evolution of the autobiographers.

My proposal of educational autobiography has a guided approach. Having to develop my courses with a great number of students and not having assistants, I have created this version of autobiography to make the development of the activity during a semester possible (15 weeks of classes). That is to say, in a short period of time. Working during the semester in parallel with four groups of students (of about 60 students per group), and having to encourage experience by themselves, I have given great importance to written orientations. I have aimed to combine group sessions, centred on oral work, with the students' autonomous work which consists of developing the educational, family and social life story. At the end of the process, each student will have produced two written documents: an autobiographical story and an analysis of this story (regarding my sources and influences, see: Delory-Momberger, 2003; Demetrio, 2003; Dominicé, 2000 & 2002; Formenti, 1998 & 2002; Josso, 1991; Lainé, 1998; Pineau, 2000; Pineau & Le Grand, 1996; West, 1996).

It seems important to me to point out that when we work with autobiographical approaches in training activities that are obligatory for the students, it is necessary to offer other work alternatives, so that the student or the adult in training always has the option to decide if he wishes or not to involve himself in the writing of his own autobiography. This seems to me to be a reasonable solution, halfway between these two extreme stances: on the one hand, to limit autobiographical experiences to seminars and freely-chosen courses; on the other hand, to prevent students from feeling obligated to involve themselves in a training experience with a deep personal and affective dimension. This is part of the ethical problem of life stories in training. It is also important to guarantee privacy, anonymity and the right of authorship, which excludes using stories without the approval of the authors.

Educational autobiography is a suitable instrument to explore the deep roots of learning carried out throughout life. The genealogical tree, the analysis of the family group, the commentary on the local environment, the lifeline, the personal shield or coat of arms and the learning narratives in different contexts (family and couple, school, peer groups, associations, information and communication technologies, leisure, the world of work) are some of the questions proposed as storylines of the written autobiography. These themes are offered as work possibilities and never as points that must be tackled.

In spite of the university institutional framework, the experience of autobiography has, I believe, known how to preserve the spontaneity, creativity and freedom inherent to profound and experiential training activities, those that make progress in self-knowledge and the development of those taking part possible. In this sense, autobiography has a very open format and I believe that this is an important reason for the richness and strength of this training activity. Autobiography helps students to explicitly state their personal models and paradigms connected with culture, knowledge, representations, interpersonal relationships and educational values.

### **Working with genealogical trees and family narratives**

The genealogical tree is a graphic representation of the family roots, specifying the biological and legal links that connect the different members of the family. I normally ask students to work with at least three generations: the grandparents and other contemporary relatives; the parents and uncles and aunts;

the generation of the student and of his brothers and sisters and cousins (in the case of the students having children or nephews or nieces, another generation will appear in the tree). When it is possible, with data of generations prior to the grandparents, the students include information about great-grandparents and previous ancestors. The family memory is usually lost in the generation of the great-grandparents, although in some cases the families of the students have information about the family genealogy down through quite broad historical periods. It is curious to ascertain that if we were to go back ten generations, we would have to refer to 512 ancestors of this tenth generation before ours.

My work proposal on the family genealogical tree is made up of four phases. The first refers to the identifying and location in the tree of the greatest number of relatives possible of, at least, the three generations mentioned. This is a stage of inquiry and of accumulating information which will be worked on later to give meaning to the data obtained, placing them in a wider historical, social and cultural context. Among the relevant information (demographic, historical, cultural, social, economic, ideological and axiological) that I propose to annex to the tree are the following (it is a broad list; the students cannot normally work on all the questions proposed and tend to go more deeply when working on the members of their own family unit):

Christian name(s) and surname.

Place of birth.

Places they have lived.

Academic training, relevant informal learning and cultural themes.

Jobs, social class profile, economic questions and money handling.

Time use, hobbies and personal interests.

Values, beliefs and spirituality, including religious attitudes.

Participating in the community and ideological or political tendencies.

Health, illness and subjects related to the body and sexuality.

Relevant events, rites of passage and important dates of the life path.

Personal and family evolution, including crises and significant transitions.

This is a broad subject matter that the students adapt based on the information gathered, the attitudes of the family members towards the activity, the degree of depth with which they can work and the time available.

The second phase is made up of working out the microbiographies of some of the family members, carried out from the data available, based on the personal criteria of the student and the ease of access and the willingness of the family members. Informal conversations and mini-interviews are important means of gathering information in this phase.

The third phase takes advantage of the work of the first two to try and describe the material and symbolic universe of the different generations worked on. On occasions this can involve the carrying out of separate descriptions of the paternal and maternal branches. In this third phase we go beyond the predominantly individual approach of the two initial phases and work on the cultural, group and relational dimensions. These descriptions represent an important challenge for the students due mainly, according to my experience, to two reasons. One is the difficulty of distancing themselves with respect to their own family. In the case of the youngest university students (18 or 19 years old), it is difficult for them to adopt a critical, distanced and reflexive look about their own family. In students over 25, I have noted a greater capacity of critical distancing from the family. The second difficulty has to do with the knowledge models that the students usually handle. Most of them tend to reason from schemes centred on the individual, on the singular subject. They have limitations, for example, in understanding that history and culture have to do especially with human groups, with institutions, with complex structures, with social relationships. This is why it is difficult for them to think of the family from categories such as the generation, the gender, the social class, culture and ethnicity. It is in this

tension between the subjective experience of the family roots and the demand of a critical look that I bring up about their ancestors that the training potentiality of the genealogical work lies.

The fourth phase is made up of the analysis of the family unit of the student (the family that lives permanently in the home). The analysis of the family group tends to begin with the work on the material and physical elements of the home. To do so, I advise them to look for or do a plan of the home. We will thus be able to work on the use of spaces and the constructed meaning of spaces, both individually and from cultural patterns present in the different families. Later we work on the symbolic and axiological levels that make up the family system and the complex relationships between the different components, paying special attention to the generational and gender differences the upbringing and socialization guidelines, the family roles, the reciprocal relationships of communication and influence, the time uses, the family recompositions and the family change.

What is moreover important is the documentation work in a double aspect. Firstly, “hot” and sensitive documentation, derived from conversations and interviews with the family members and the consulting of personal documents linked to the past and present family legacy. Secondly, “cold” documentation, objective and distanced, of documents and historical, social, economic and cultural publications that allow the structures, the tendencies and the patterns that explain, influence, condition and structure the specific conditions of the families and communities to be grasped. The work having to do with the family memory is made easier by the mini-interviews of family members and by searching for documents and traces of the family's informal archives.

Photographs have traditionally been the main trace material that gives us back the family past. In recent decades, with audio recorders, video and digital technologies, a huge diversification of the documental sources connected with families has taken place. Photographs are documents of great importance in educational autobiography. Digital technology makes the tasks of reviewing, ordering and reproducing the most significant images – selected by the student with a free criterion - easier. The comments written about photographs provided by the autobiographers develop the capacities of observation and description, as well as connecting the different moments of the life cycle naturally.

### **Completing the family narratives with other biographical tools.**

In this section I will be presenting other biographical tools, used to complete the work on family narratives. The *life line* consists of a chronological representation of the most important events in a person's life, along a temporal axis that is developed between birth and the current moment. This makes a first representation of the personal path organized around the family, school and other environments easier. The *personal shield* or blazon is a symbolic representation of personal identity, articulated around four elements: a) the most important memory of childhood; b) the most fervent wish concerning the future; c) the favorite leisure activity; and d) the main quality subjects attribute to themselves. The shield favors work on the imaginary through graphic expression and the freedom of criteria to communicate one's own identity.

The *narratives of learning experiences*, from birth to the current moment are organized in connection with the major educational stages: between 0 and 6 years; between 6 and 12 years; and between 12 and 18 years. The students face, for the first time, the making of their personal educational history, articulated from experience, but which aspires to generate knowledge about socialization, education and teaching (West, 1996; Merrill, 1999; Dominicé, 2000 and 2002; Demetrio, 2003; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). *Photographs* are documents of a major importance in educational autobiography. Digital technology facilitates the task of reviewing, ordering and reproducing the most significant images. The comments on the photographs by the autobiographers develop the capacities of observation and description, at the same time as they very naturally connect the different moments of the vital cycle (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, 74-123).

Finally, the *reflective and interpretative balance* makes an overall view of the process carried out possible, as well as establishing connections between the different contents worked on, susceptible to a personal and

narrative articulation (for example, from a temporal perspective, connecting with the past, present and future; or in terms of learning settings, such as the family, school, means, peer groups and others). It is a matter of building meaning from lived-out and recounted experience. This implies reflection about personal identity and its connection with the personal and interpersonal history, as well as a reflection on the different types of ego: told, occult, secret, perceived by others, desired, public, and reconstructed (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001; Coffey, 1999; Denzin, 1989).

In this activity *the trainer takes on various roles*: a) the facilitating of clear guidelines to carry out the activity, from its own voluntary nature, to guarantee that the activity be a joyful experience of creative work, intellectual autonomy and profound affective experience; b) the motivating of the desire to search and research, aimed at recuperating evidence, experience and feelings, in dialogue with the family, mentors, friends and educators; c) the accompanying of the process of writing and the facilitating of strategies to unblock difficulties and encourage progress; and d) the reduction and relief of anxiety and unease that some students experience, who refuse to abandon the activity in spite of the difficulty that they experience. The educator is the guarantor of what is secret and confidential. This must also be respected by the students when they carry out oral exchange sessions or when the students exchange their autobiographies to read them. By its aims, methodology, context and contents, educational autobiography is a training activity and cannot be conceived either as psychological aid or as psychotherapy. However, it can have, and in fact in many cases this does happen, a therapeutic effect, connected with the redefining of some events of the past and the achievement of a more integrated and mature perspective of personal evolution. We also aspire to favor the classic aims of psychoanalysis, such as P. Ricoeur describes them: "... to substitute fragments of histories that are at the same time unintelligible and unbearable with a coherent and acceptable history" (Ricoeur, 1985, 444).

### **From subjective narratives to historical and sociocultural analysis**

The analyses of autobiographical and biographical documents tend to be especially concerned with exploring the dialectic between personal dimensions and social structures. In this context, we find in different authors a common interest in explaining and understanding the dynamics that link subjectivity with society and culture. The differences between structure and agency (Giddens), system and actor (Touraine), and field and habitus (Bourdieu), formulated from different theoretical and methodological platforms all, however, go in the same explanatory direction. Bertaux (1997) has shown a special interest in the study of intersubjective relationships in the framework of groups, associations, institutions and intermediate level environments (family and interpersonal relationships, school and adult training experience, professional integration and employment). This is where the deep connections between individual subjectivity and global social structures can be grasped, such as the social class, gender relationships, generation and ethnicity. Bertaux (1997) also points out the importance of comparing the different stories gathered via a process of saturation which will indicate to us the moment at which the new information gathered or analyzed does not add a significant value to the information already analyzed.

In recent years there has been a good deal of development in the field of the study of the family and family member and generational relationships, from a sociological, cultural and historical perspective. The study of the common experiences of different cohorts and of demographical patterns is being carried out via the analysis of open interviews and other personal documents. This analysis is suitable for setting up typologies. These make it possible to work in a comparative manner with different cases and contexts. Analysis involves the transition from the subjective and experiential story to the socio-cultural commentary. This allows the narratives (individual, fragmentary, subjective, partial) to be placed in a broader socio-structural framework (nature, territory, culture, social class, gender, social change, general transmission, peer group, crisis of traditional life-styles, etc.).

The intense personal involvement favoured by group sessions centred on orality promotes an appropriation of experience. This appropriation is worked specifically in the final phases of the activity when requesting students to re-read the autobiographical text produced and to undertake the difficult



work of submitting it to a critical analysis. The students gradually discover that they are not only able to write their life stories – a question that many doubted when beginning the experience – but also, furthermore, they can become hermeneutist of their own writing and, consequently, of their own lives. The transition between the autobiographical story and the written analysis marks the genuine formative moment of the autobiography.

The analysis of the autobiography has a basically socio-cultural approach, although the student can decide the content and the approaches of his analysis. The aim of the analysis is for the student to place his biographical path in the framework of its genealogical and family context, of its local community and of its broader socio-cultural structure. The students place their own story better, this being understood as their personal itinerary and as a development that can only be clearly understood in the context of broader family, educational, historical and socio-cultural contexts. I believe that this effort of understanding the relationships between the individual development and the contexts of development promotes the construction of a theory by the students. This theorizing, which turns out to be very inconsistent, based on the capacities of the different students, aims to contribute to the most difficult problem that this activity displays. I am referring to the construction of a personal theory that sheds light on the relationships between the personal biography, the contexts of the development of the intermediate level (the family, the school and the community environment) and broader socio-cultural areas. In the intersection of these three vertices (biography as a micro-level; close contexts as an intermediate level; and global contexts as a macro-level) is, I believe, to be found the most decisive formative and reflexive principle of the educational autobiography. The theorizing that is attempted is backed by the group debates, the carrying out of biographical activities in small groups, the search for relationships between worked out readings and the autobiographical story, the autonomous search for documentation and the analytical and reflexive writing.

Autobiography trains skills of observation, research and documentation. Gathering biographical material and documents is an exciting task whose limits are those that the students themselves set out. The micro-interviews carried out with family members and close educators start off as brief, simple and motivating research. This is an important methodological dimension of the activity. The students become more mature gathering, organizing and analyzing biographical material. The experiential initiation carried out with this field work in the family and local area increases interest and understanding about ethical questions (privacy, respect for the informers, the dynamic of secrets, trust in the testimonies), the work procedures (instrument design, data gathering problems, technique and data triangulation) and the hermeneutic problems derived from the analysis of the experience lived out (the involvement of the student who researches and documents, the diversity of perspectives, the difficulties of writing life stories, the variety of audiences of the stories produced, the usefulness of analysis for constructing a personal educational theory). For all of these reasons, autobiography is an easy path to provoke the debate about culture, education, new technologies, personal and collective identity, values, and pedagogical contents and methods.

### **Implications and conclusions**

Autobiographical narrations have implications for both research and training. As a research instrument, written narrations offer first-hand biographical materials about recent history, society, culture, the family and education. These materials make it possible to approach historical and socio-cultural questions from the subjective and experiential perspective of the subjects.

As a training instrument, autobiographical narrations favour the production and appropriation of knowledge, make the learning of basic techniques of qualitative research easier, allow the applying of disciplinary knowledge in social and close personal contexts, and have a great motivating strength. Due to all this, life stories are useful for the creation of motivating learning contexts, centred on the

lives of students and favouring an integrating education of cognitive, emotional and social dimensions. These methods have much to contribute to teaching in matters of social sciences such as cultural anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, pedagogy, psychology, social work and communication.

#### **ANNEX: SOME CRITERIA TO ASSESS THE ANALYSIS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIONS:**

- Depth, time, effort and dedication are noted. It is not a work that is carried out hastily.
- The work reveals analytical, reflexive and critical capacities.
- The work reveals an interest in comparing from different angles, dimensions and perspectives.
- The work is original and reflects a particular and typical way of tackling the activity.
- Attention is paid to material experiences and symbolic dimensions (beliefs and values) of different generations.
- The use of time and spaces is worked on from a comparative and analytical point of view.
- Social, economic, cultural and gender differences are investigated.
- Processes of modernization and historical and socio-cultural changes linked to the evolution of generations and family groups are described.
- A reflexive analysis of the geographical, social and historic contexts is shown.
- The data and information consulted is duly filtered and integrated into the work appropriately (this implies that there is no repeated plagiarism of digital or paper documental sources).
- There is an interest in analyzing and theorizing about local contexts, family paths and biographical itineraries from the classic categories of sociology and anthropology (age and age groups, social differences, cultural belongings, ethnic groups and gender relationships).

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