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**PAPER:**

**Autobiographical Learning and Emotional Education**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

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).

In the last fifteen years the auto/biographical approach has gained full recognition in social, academic, teaching and research contexts (in English: Alheit, Bron, Brugger & Dominicé, 1995; Chamberlaine, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000; Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Dominicé, 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Merrill, 1999; West, 1996, 2001; in French: Bertaux, 1997; Coulon & Le Grand, 2000; Dominicé, 2002; Ferrarotti, 1983; Pineau 1998, 2000; Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983; Pineau & Le Grand, 2002; in Italian: Demetrio, 1996, 2003; Formenti, 1998, 2002, 2004; Olagnero, 2004; in Spanish: Bolívar, 1997; Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001; González Monteagudo, 1996b, 2004a; Miguel, 1996; Pujadas, 1996).

In this paper we explore some epistemological, methodological and ethical questions related to auto/biographical learning –particularly through educational autobiography-, from my experience and the literature of the last few years. Later, we discuss emotional education worked through personal narratives.

## 2. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL METHODS IN EDUCATION.

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, 204) among others.

In contrast with ASIHVIF, the ESREA Life History and Biography Network (animated by L. West) is more interested in the research dimensions of adult, professional and lifelong learning (Alheit, Bron, Brugger & Dominicé, 1995; Salling Olesen, 2005; West, 1996, 2001; Merrill, 1999). Nevertheless, in the last few years there has been a greater rapprochement between the two groups, with a double attention, in both cases, to teaching and research dimensions of life histories (cf. Dominicé, 2000, 2002).

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 an 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 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.

The following table, adapted and shortened from Formenti (1996, 92; 1998, 159-160), is reproduced in order to show the variety of techniques used in autobiographical learning

**Table n° 1. Instruments of autobiographical work  
(Adapted and shortened from Formenti, 1996, 92; 1998, 159-160)**

| <b>Instruments of individual work (spontaneous or with precise instructions)</b>   |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- personal journal (daily, nocturnal, of fixed periodicity, occasional)</li> <li>- production of a thematic text</li> <li>- production of a creative/expressive text</li> <li>- search for material testimonies (family photographs, letters, songs, poems, objects)</li> <li>- creation of “complex objects”, with simultaneous use of several languages (living sculptures...)</li> <li>- instruments of pencil and paper (questionnaires, chronological profiles)</li> </ul> |
| <b>Instruments of work face to face (with and without observers)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- open interview (for example, “Tell me your life”)</li> <li>- in depth interview</li> <li>- projective methods (use of images, sounds, symbols)</li> <li>- critic-clinic method (psycho cognitive inquiry on the ideational process)</li> <li>- back-talking method (restitution by the interviewer)</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Instruments of collective work</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- oral discussion based on documents (produced with the instruments mentioned above)</li> <li>- discussion on biographical subjects</li> <li>- auto presentation before the group (oral, written, mixed)</li> <li>- work of group with observers</li> <li>- collective use of projective materials and evocative methods (with discussion)</li> <li>- mixed and crossed techniques (from couple to group, from individual to group, and vice versa)</li> </ul>                  |

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, 2002; Josso, 2000; Dominicé, 2000).

### 3. THE WORK WITH EMOTIONS IN PSYCHOTHERAPIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON EDUCATION.

Before emotional education gained the social attention obtained in the nineties, emotions had been a question systematically worked by psychoanalysis and psychotherapies. Freud pointed out the significance of emotions and feelings in human life and indicated some ways to access to emotions in order to foster people's mental health (Freud, 1914, 1915). Following the trail started by Freud, or even in opposition to him in relevant questions, the psychologists of dynamic orientation have continued exploring human feelings, through a large variety of theoretical and technical approaches, including verbal and written communication, free associations, dreams, body, drawing, drama, group and family.

The oral historian P. Thompson has emphasized the relevance of psychoanalysis and family therapy in relation to historical understanding, in terms of relevant role of affective processes: "One of the principal lessons to be drawn from both kinds of therapy is the need for an enhanced historical sensitivity to the power of emotion, of unconscious desire, rejection, and imitation, as an integral part of the structure of ordinary social life and of its transmission from generation to generation" (Thompson, 2000, 177).

The works undertaken by the American psychiatrist Robert Butler four decades ago with the elderly have shown the importance of reminiscence in the process of personal maturing process. As Thompson points out discussing the Butler's experiences, Life Review is carried out through reminiscence, as "part of a universal process for re-evaluating past conflicts to re-establish self-identity, and a means of helping the elderly to help themselves" (Thompson, 2000, 184).

On the whole, there is no doubt that educational theory and practice have received with indifference the potential contributions that could come from psychotherapies in connection with research and work on human emotions (psychoanalysis in its different versions, bio energy, group dynamic, psychotherapy centered on the client, psychodrama, gestalt and systemic therapies, transactional analysis, etc). C. Naranjo has recently criticised "the taboo against the therapeutic" installed in the current education, and at the same time has savaged "the patriarchal scientism of our academic milieu" (Naranjo, 2004, 143).

We think that in education it is possible to learn a lot from psychotherapies (cf. Niewiadomski & Villers, 2002). We also believe that therapy and education are complementary, given that both pursue –from different contexts, frameworks and processes- similar aims: personal and social growth (on emotional therapy, cf. Bisquerra, 2001, 113-139). Lastly, we would like emphasize our rejection to the disciplinary dimension ascribed to therapy, incompatible with personal autonomy and freedom. In our *therapeutic society*, autonomy and freedom are many times threatened by the protective role undertaken by political, media, health, religious, educational, and family institutions through the disciplinary and pastoral dimensions of power (cf. Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 2001, 113-115; Foucault, 1990).

#### 4. EMOTIONAL EDUCATION THROUGH AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL METHODS.

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; Segura & Arcas, 2003; Steiner, 2003; Marina, 2004). Particularly, the concept of emotional intelligence, popularized with great success by Goleman (1995, 1999) one decade ago, has produced an 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, 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 our 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). The answer apparently considers emotional education within a model of competitiveness and efficiency, since the development of emotional education is linked to economic prosperity.

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 to work with the past, elaborating conflicts and crises and, then, 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 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 to work 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).

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