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Biographical and Narrative Research in Iberoamerica: Emergence, Development and State Fields¹

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Introduction

Telling one's life experiences and "reading" (in the sense of "interpreting") these events/actions, based on the stories that the agents narrate, has become a research *perspective* in its own right. In Iberoamerica, as in Europe, after the crisis of positivism and the hermeneutic turn in the social sciences, the biographical approach has become a specific research perspective (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001). With the "narrative turn", there is an attempt to grant the deserved relevance to the discursive dimension of individuality, that is, to the ways humans experience and attach meaning to the world of life through language. Within qualitative research, the biographical and narrative approach has been acquiring its own identity in Iberoamerica in the social sciences.

Life-stories and *narrative inquiry*, along with international research, have established a particular field of research in Latin America that becomes more important with time, partly strengthened by postmodern disenchantment with the grand narratives and by the demand for the personal and emotional dimension in the social sciences. A certain disillusionment with the explanations of subjectivity by sociological or historical referents has produced the strong emergence of the dynamic materiality of the subject's word as a component of his/her experiences, memory and identity. The new biographical and narrative genres have the potential to represent the experience lived in the social life; therefore, they have extended into the field of education (Abrahão, 2012).

The (auto)biographical research has become generalized. It is used by more and more research projects, and a growing number of articles and books have shown the importance and/or usefulness of this perspective as the integration of different areas of knowledge in education. Stories and histories are increasingly viewed as relevant material for social scientific analysis in education. The subjects' word is our only access to the world as, in the words of Derrida, *il n'y a pas hors de texte* ("there is nothing outside of text").

We review the origins, development and variants of narrative inquiry and life stories in education, both in Spanish (Spain, Latin America) and Portuguese (Portugal-Brazil) speaking countries, which form part of the Iberoamerican community (Bolívar & Domingo, 2006a). What has been done in education was initially dependent on and enriched by the set of discursive genres that compose the "biographical space" (Arfuch, 2002), at a crossroads where different disciplines converge (Anthropology and Ethnography, Sociology, History, Linguistics and Literary Theory, Philosophy, Psychology). Sharing the same Latin language (Spanish, Portuguese) and publishing world allows the ideas and investigations to flow from one side of the Atlantic to the other. In the Spanish case –moreover– with Spanish exiles moving to Iberoamerican countries after the Spanish Civil War (1939), there is an interrelationship between Spanish-speaking countries, which, in some cases, is increased by their later return to Spain, coinciding with its democratization.

Origin and development of the narrative-biographical methodology

The qualitative methodology in Spain, as in the rest of the Iberoamerican countries, has a long historical past in social research. Due to the dictatorship in Spain, with the resulting isolation of the main theoretical movements, it is in Iberoamerica where the first developments of the qualitative methodology, and more specifically, of the narrative-biographical methodology, take place. In this regard, we would like to emphasize, as Sarabia and Zarco (1997: 32-36) highlight in their history, the sociological work carried out by

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José Medina Echevarría in various countries (Mexico, Colombia and Chile). At the beginning of the 1940s, Medina publishes his work *Sociology: theory and technique* (Medina, 1941), where he maintains –following the ideas of the German thought of Dilthey, Rickert and Weber, and extended in Spain by the Ortegian circles – a specific methodology for the cultural sciences, compared to the natural sciences. Borrowing ideas from the Chicago School, Medina considers that human behavior is a symbolic activity that must be studied with a corresponding methodology, considering *The Polish Peasant* by Thomas and Znaniecki to be “the best monograph of the century so far”.

Life stories are used in two texts in the 1970s. First, as various authors have pointed out (López-Galán, 1996; Valles, 2009), in Buenos Aires (and a few years later in Spain), Juan Francisco Marsal (1969) publishes a life story about a Spanish immigrant to Argentina, exemplifying in the Argentinian case, the life story of the peasant told by Thomas and Znaniecki (1994) in their *opus magna* about Polish people who emigrated to Chicago. In addition, in one of the first compilations about life stories in Spanish, in Buenos Aires, Balán (1974) publishes a monograph on *Life stories in social sciences: theory and technique*, where he includes relevant articles on the topic. In the following years, together with Elisabeth Jelin (Balán & Jelin, 1980), he publishes a second treatment of the topic called *The structure of the personal biography*. From that time on, the methodology increases its presence in the social sciences (Ferrarotti, 2014). Thus, in Buenos Aires, the Social Science Notebooks by FLACSO publish a monograph on *Oral history and life stories*, which includes relevant work by Bertaux (1988). In the Spanish setting, the book by Marinas and Santamarina (1993) marks the official introduction of this methodology into the university setting.

We start with the different review and systematization efforts made in this oral history field, as well as the specific review carried out by Vallés and Baer (2005) in the Spanish setting of the evolution of qualitative research in the social sciences. We conduct a global review in order to elaborate a bibliographical guide for investigation in the social sciences from the narrative-biographical point of view (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 1998). Recently, the *Mexican Journal of Educational Research* dedicated a monographic issue (num. 62, 2014) to a review of autobiography in the Iberoamerican setting, with the title: “Autobiography and education: traditions, dialogues and methodologies”, which we use in this paper.

An initial historical treatment in the Iberoamerican context of the origin and development of the biographical method reveals that it has had many changing viewpoints and topics of interest over time. They range from narrative-literary considerations and diverse ideographic and conservationist positions to the use of voices and personal documents oriented toward recovering the historical record of episodes, personalities and situations of special personal and/or social relevance, or from the other history, the non-official one, that of common people, minorities, the defeated, farm workers, the silenced or the “voiceless”. Later, autobiographical accounts and life stories have gradually been introduced as relevant material in educational research. This methodology becomes diversified and specified “*in crescendo*” from the so-called “*biographical symptom*” (Santamarina & Marinas, 1994) to its blossoming in the present day, which discusses “*the reason behind the symptom*” (Marinas, 2004):

Life stories and biographies seem to have a new importance at the present time. Precisely because there is an in-depth review of our social knowledge (...), there is an interest in the individual, group and collective memory processes, at a time when the society of the mass media tries to homogenize all forms of knowledge and social communication (Santamarina & Marinas, 1994, p. 260).

From this indicator –called the “*biographical symptom*”– a discourse arises that was previously hidden in traditional sociological research and now reappears with strength, broadening its view to retain and form a self-awareness of society. Stories and histories are increasingly seen as relevant material for social scientific analysis. Thus, a scenario is established that, from different perspectives and with different influences and trajectories (some local and some clearly international), begins to develop into a shifting of the parameters of social science research, mainly based on oral histories, the political demands of the defeated and majority minorities (women, peasants or common people), and the rise of qualitative sociological research. At the same time, a theoretical corpus is being created (arguments, reasons, principles and procedures for action), which gives it methodological and epistemological form and structure, to the point of becoming an approach in its own right, with its own ways of using the qualitative methodology to work with and on life stories, experiences and (auto)biographical sources, as we have argued (Bolívar, 2002).

Main moments and points of interest

We describe the emergence and development process in the Iberoamerican setting according to topics of interest, time and countries. Our approach will rest on some moments or phases that have been accumulating and reconstructing themselves up until the present time. With velocities, centers of attention and specific circumstances by countries, on the whole it follows an evolution similar to the approach at the international level.

In the 1920s, some anthropologists feel the need to document the minority or exotic cultures shown in the accounts. In this way, they begin to establish the way customs and institutions are experienced from within, in order to rescue the history of indigenous peoples, peasant communities, or accounts of the Mexican Revolution, generally collected by non-academic institutions and agents. As forms of oral history, biographies and testimonies of outstanding personalities are extensively collected. Thus, anthropology uses biographies to chronologically reconstruct the individual experience to show how an individual reacts to the cultural norms. An interesting variant is to use various "*crossed testimonies*" by key informants and '*parallel narrations*' of those involved, which give the account a "*polyphonic structure*" (Lewis, 1961).

Recovering the historical memory

Within a political and dissenting use of the oral history, after the restoration of democracy in various countries that had gone through dictatorships, an important movement emerges that involves the restoration of truth or telling the other story (silenced and hidden). Life stories are told to keep people from losing their identity and, at the same time, to recover the biographical memory of events that otherwise would remain invisible and unpunished. As Schwarzstein (1995) points out, in Latin America this approach has special transcendence related to these memory recovery processes, based on an option of political commitment and close ties to social movements.

In the Spanish context, in addition to the already classic study by Fraser (1979), numerous studies (literary, journalistic and sociological research) recover accounts of survivors, "spies", women and exiles during the Spanish civil war. Among others, Isabel Allende describes the coup d'état of General Pinochet in Chile in a very personal way, and she tells her family story up until that time so as not to lose either the memory or the identity.

Studies on marginalization

From the period between the two World Wars to the 1960s, the research focuses on social change and acculturation, and it especially addresses marginalization, minorities, etc., based on the individual or experiential dimension. With this rise in positivism and quantification, the biographical methodology is restricted to collectives that are difficult to access and impossible to quantify, due to residing precisely in the margins. It corresponds to a shift from an exterior or distant exoticism (testimonials of the first documentalist anthropologists) to an interior or *interactionist* dimension, stemming from the psychoanalytic and anthropological school of the study of culture and personality and the more sociological approach of the Chicago School.

Due to the transcendence of his work, Oscar Lewis (1961) holds a prominent position, especially regarding his first great studies (*Anthropology of poverty*, first, and *The sons of Sánchez*, later, followed by *Pedro Martínez*), where he sheds light on the experience of marginalization and poverty (Acebes, 1994). Although his point of view is the subject of discussion (North American and colonialist anthropologist), he shows the virtues of the biographical method, specifically by collecting multiple autobiographies and constructing, through intersecting life stories, a polyphonic synthesis that makes it possible for the biographical dimension of families to emerge as the unit of analysis. Although it is true that the social and structural contexts that determine the biographical conditions are not sufficiently visible, he goes beyond the mere individual account to approach the social through the individual. Later, he opts for another more emancipating and dissenting perspective that deals with marginalization as a proposal to make the "other" society emerge, in order to try to understand the deeper reasons for it, the structural violence it suffers from, and the solution attempts experienced and lived by its protagonists.

A qualitative leap occurs when the approach is generalized to deal with everyday experiences. Then it is possible to say that the area of study has been institutionalized as a space for interdisciplinary debate and as a specific field of qualitative methodology. The acceptance and generalization of biographical-narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in its own right means that more and more research projects use it, with a systematization and specialization in these types of research, incorporating new contributions, perspectives, and methodologies. The different biographical variants (life stories, oral histories, biography, autobiography, testimonies, stories, videography, scholastic writing, among others) are used profusely. At the same time, this renewed strength of studies about the lives of the actors brings changes in the research conceptions and the role of the subjects. A growing dialogue and academic cooperation exists among authors, with mutual influences (Abrahão & Bolívar, 2014).

Differential development by countries

To some degree, Mexico and Argentina could be considered the precursors of studies and systematizations of this methodology. On the one hand, in the former, in addition to the studies by Oscar Lewis, Jorge Aceves (1993), from the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (Ciesas), introduces some of the most accredited international investigators (Paul Thompson, Daniel Bertaux, etc.) in his publication on oral histories. On the other hand, years before that, from Argentina, Jorge Balán (1974) introduces some of the most accredited voices in the social sciences (Howard Becker, Juan F. Marsal, etc.) in his collection about life stories. Both authors help to illuminate new forms in the entire Iberoamerican world. Undoubtedly, their publishing potential is felt through the projection of their own approaches and contributions or the translation of works of considerable interest that would have had trouble reaching Spain at certain points in history.

Argentina has a widely developed oral history, as shown by the creation of the Oral History Archive of the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, with the journal *Recovered Voices*, which contains accounts of union leaders or about Peronism (Schwarztein, 1991). In the past twenty years, as Suárez (2014, 766) points out, “the qualitative research modalities of (auto)biographical and narrative inquiry have become widely dominant and generalized in the territory of the educational sciences”. In a re-occurring way, the (auto)biographical narrative is used in knowledge production processes and the wisdom they produce. From the University of Buenos Aires, Daniel Suárez develops an extensive project of elaborating and gathering accounts of teachers’ pedagogical experience (Suárez, 2011) (Network of Teacher Training and Educational Narratives) and leads the Latin American Network of Narrative Inquiry, (Auto)biography and Education (*Rednaue*),

México has experience in the use of the oral history as an important part of the study in the social sciences. According to Jorge Aceves (1996), the oral history: “is interested in the social acts and events where institutions and individuals intervene in certain economic, political and cultural-symbolic processes. It is interested in producing knowledge, and not just in being a channel for the oral presentation of testimonies”. In the past decade, according to the review by Serrano and Ramos (2014), the production of the biographical thematic in education has been broadened, diversifying topics, referents and points of view.

While in other places emphasis is placed on the peasants (Mexico or Costa Rica) or on the immigrants (Argentina or Uruguay), in **Chile** there is interest in topics related to worker militancy or laborers who reach the city and fight to find a place, highlighting –as in the previous case– the organizational capacity of the popular sectors and the interest in everyday situations. In a review of the biographical production in the past decade in Mexico, Serrano and Ramos (2014: 849-50) state that “the production on the biographical theme in education has broadened, diversifying topics, referents and perspectives. It is organized by generic designations (auto/biography, trajectory), the methodological approach (life stories, oral history), or the technique used (interview). Ideas have circulated from the diverse European, North American and Latin American traditions”.

The use of life stories in **Brazil** is initially also inscribed under the influence of the oral history. There is (since 1994) a strong Brazilian Association of Oral History (ABHO), integrated in the International Oral History Association, which joins together collectives and researchers in the areas of history, social sciences, anthropology and education. In addition to an electronic Bulletin, it edits (since 1998) a journal (*Oral History*) in Portuguese and English that contains Brazilian and international studies from an interdisciplinary perspective on orality. Later, the use of life stories is generalized, highlighting research groups, seminars, symposia, congresses, dissertations and theses, book publication and journal organization, and the creation of associations and research networks (Bueno et al., 2006; Souza, 2014a). In this regard, the International Congress of (Auto)biographical Research (*Congresso Internacional de Pesquisa (Auto)biográfica, CIPA*) stands out for its relevance, as it has fostered exchanges among groups about analytic perspectives of questions related to the potential of (auto)biographical sources. It has contributed to strengthening ties between institutions and professionals from different disciplinary traditions and approaches. Likewise, in these CIPA, the epistemological and theoretical-methodological reflections about research on life stories stand out, as well as their implications as research-training practice. The 6th CIPA took place in Rio de Janeiro (November, 2014), with the theme of “Between public and private: ways of living, narrating and keeping” (Abrahão et al., 2014).

In 2008, the creation of the Brazilian Association of (Auto)biographical Research (*BIOgraph*) made it possible to group Brazilian professionals who investigate (auto)biographies, memory, life stories and training practices. Moreover, it promotes and coordinates studies and investigations, events and teaching in this area, and it has established international relations with Latin America (*Rednaue*) and Europe through the Latin America-Europe Scientific Network of Biographical Inquiry in Education (*BioGrafia*). In Brazil, the narrative experiences were evaluated and organized as training memorials, educational narratives and life stories of outstanding Brazilian educators, among others, who, apart from the singularities of each of the expressions and the way they are developed by researchers-educators, value the reflective writing of the training path.

Other Iberoamerican countries have experienced their own development of the narrative and oral history. Thus, in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador, oral histories and biographies have a clear relationship with the literacy campaigns carried out in these countries and, in another dimension, the collection of data, traditions, culture and languages of indigenous communities by anthropologists, historians, sociologists or linguists. In Costa Rica, national contests have been held to recover peasants' autobiographies, which serve as the basis for reconstructing the history of the country from pre-Columbian times. In **Colombia**, the two-volume book by Lulle, Vargar and Zamudio (1998) includes the 24 speeches, in addition to the study by Coninck and Godard, presented in the Seminary “The uses of the life story in the Social Sciences”. It is a good expression of the variety of approaches and experiences in the use of the biographical method in Latin America. The journal “Education and Teaching”, edited a monographic issue (num. 61, 2011) on “Narrative(s), (auto)biography(ies) and education”, which shows the latest developments (consolidation of the field of study, with a plural methodology, and interchange among European and Latin American authors).

On the **Iberian Peninsula**, Spain has a well-developed tradition in the study of the (auto)biography, although with more of a historical and literary nature than a purely sociological one. The philosopher Ortega and Gasset (1947: 40-41), who spread the ideas of Dilthey, pointed out –in his essay *History as a system*– that “in contrast to purely mathematical-physical reasoning, there is, then, a narrative reasoning. To understand something human, personal or collective, it is necessary to tell a story. [...] The life experiences made the future of man narrower. One's life is based on the past. In sum, *man does not have a nature, but rather a history*”. The personal relationships experienced by each individual become the basis for the hermeneutic comprehension of human actions. The continuation of this methodology, from the perspective of generations, can be seen in the work by Ortegian disciple Julián Marías (1949) in *the historical method of the generations*. Years later, the traditional German influence is replaced by North American sociology.

In the 1990s, two systematic presentations were published on the life story approaches, one from an anthropological perspective (Pujadas, 1992) and the other from a sociological viewpoint (De Miguel,

1996). In the area of education, my research group has solidly contributed to extending this biographical-narrative approach, both in research (Bolívar, 1999; Bolívar & Domingo, 2006b) and in its systematization (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001). The Barcelona group, formed by Fernando Hernández, Juan María Sancho and collaborators, started up a life stories network that has held various congresses whose minutes have been published openly in electronic format (Hernández & Rifà, 2011), and the University of Málaga (Rivas et al., 2014). In addition, as shown in the review by González-Monteagudo & Ochoa (2014), the group from the University of Seville has developed the autobiography in teaching contexts, following the French proposal (González-Monteagudo, 2011). In Spain, there has also been widespread development among History of Education researchers of *the use of oral sources in historical research*. In turn, the autobiography is defined by the object and problem addressed: reconstructing the culture and *educational memory* from the perspective of the subjects or actors in it (Escolano & Hernández, 2002, Viñao, 2009).

In **Portugal**, Professor Antonio Nóvoa (1992) from the University of Lisbon introduces the French line (Geneva School), oriented toward training teachers and adults. His traditional proximity to the Anglo-Saxon and French worlds allows him to include both contributions. In this case, the impacting study by Nóvoa and Finger (1988) reflects the entire French tradition in this direction and its development in the area of teacher training, and it becomes a “work of reference for those who are interested in biographical research in Portugal, as it gave it visibility, above all in the field of education” (Lechner & Abrantes, 2014, p. 861). Adult education programs were relevant in the development of the autobiographical approach, as reconstruction and reflection about the competencies developed in different life experiences were conceived as an important tool in the “lifelong learning” process. Likewise, studies on personal and professional identity have been extensively carried out (Lopes, 2009).

Field and territories in (auto) biographical research

Two main territories have defined the (auto)biographical in the Iberoamerican countries: investigation-action-training and biographical-narrative inquiry. In fact, the biographical approach is, simultaneously, a research method and an educational tool. This dual function justifies its use in the area of the educational sciences. According to the review by Passeggi, Souza and Vicentini (2011), four aspects of (auto)biographical research have been established as axes of action and research: the act of narrating as an anthropological phenomenon; narrative autobiographies as a research method; narratives as a (self)teaching practice; and the use of narrative autobiographies as an educational intervention procedure.

Teacher education

The biographical approach has been applied to initial and continuing education studies, with emphasis on aspects linked to dimensions of the professionalization, insertion and professional development of teachers of different educational levels, in a confluence between narrative, (auto)biography and training. The (auto)biographical space in education has had, from its origins, a close relationship with education, particularly of adults, between autobiographical discursive practices and the pedagogical training of teachers. The life stories emerge in the context of permanent training. The subjects of teacher training increase their value through their life stories. As Souza (2014a, p. 790) points out: “another logic of adult education, based on tacit or experiential knowledge and the explanation of learning constructed throughout life as a meta-cognition or meta-reflection of the knowledge itself”. The (auto)biographical narratives collected in a research process or in training practices make up a corpus for analysis, in order to reconstruct the life of an individual or a collective in some area of human experience at different times of comprehensive-interpretive analysis (Souza, 2014b).

Compared to the marked heteronomy produced by training modalities focused on preparation in teaching strategies elaborated by expert knowledge, self-training changes the place occupied by the *subject of the training*, promoting forms of self- and co-training. Teachers have a set of experiential skills constructed throughout life that can be the object of critical reflection, serving individual professional development and professional identity. Placing the adult at the center of the training process seeks to give value to these experiences inscribed in autobiographical projects, as a possibility for professional orientation and

reorientation. From the French perspective of *Histoires de vie en formation* (Histories of life in the making), when people write their own life stories, they can also become hermeneutics of their own writing and, thus, of their own lives (Pineau & Michèle, 1983).

Biographical Research

Each country has its own historical rhythm but, in both, the exhaustion of functionalism and the criticisms of positivism in anthropology and sociology allow the slow blossoming of (auto)biographical research. In their place, there is a *return of the actor* and of the *voice of the subjects* to explain social phenomena, liberated from empiricists and functionalists (Cisneros, 2013). As a form of social research, where subjectivity is a source of knowledge, (auto)biographical accounts have their own research traditions. Narrative inquiry makes it possible to represent a set of dimensions of experience that formal research ignores without being able to explain certain relevant aspects (feelings, objectives, desires, etc.). Diverse *personal documents* (daily autobiographies, letters, photographs and personal objects) and *biographical interviews*, which can be oral or written, become objects of study. Specific ways of practicing biographical investigation, as we show, have their own viewpoints about approaching the research.

Biographical narration offers a conceptual and methodological framework with which to analyze essential aspects of the development of society or a profession in the lifetime of a person. It marks “his or her” personal lines and expectations for development, providing a biographical framework that makes the complexity of life and human and social action intelligible. Life can be interpreted as a story, and this is fundamental to beginning to understand human action and knowledge. The outbreak of the entire Anglo Saxon tradition of narrative inquiry as accounts of experience, mainly reflected in studies like the one by Larrosa et al. (1995), means that an important qualitative leap is taken.

The (auto)biographical research, as pointed out by Passeggi, Souza and Vicentini (2011), is configured as “a common territory suitable for dialogue between researchers in a national and international network” (p. 370). The biographical-narrative approach and its corresponding methodologies are becoming more and more seductive. Within a “hermeneutic” type methodology, it is possible to both give meaning to and understand the cognitive, affective and action dimensions. The revalorization of life stories lies in the hermeneutic shift, where social phenomena are understood as texts, and the interpretation as attributing meaning to and making sense of individual and collective experiences. The collaborations undertaken among the different research groups in the Brazilian case, and the networks of relationships with Francophone and Latin American associations and institutions, show the ways the international biographical movement has intensified and gained strength.

After the increase in the popularity of the approach among researchers, which signifies a growing rise in its use and an initial thematic and methodological convergence, it was seen as a strong perspective to look closely at the variety of topics dealing with personal aspects, culture, identity, gender, the day to day, etc. Now, with less naivety, the approach has addressed some questions of interest related to collecting and analyzing life stories, which requires greater systematization in gathering and validating the information. Given the importance of the credibility and validity of qualitative research, in-depth reviews of their epistemological status are formulated (Bolívar, 2002), complementing the work that, basically, Ricoeur (1984-88, 1992) has been carrying out in the field of the narrative.

A critical view emerges about the usefulness and uses of the method. With this consolidation process, a serious debate also arises –initiated by Polkinghorne (1995) and echoed by Bolívar (2002)– between supporters of paradigmatic analyses stemming from qualitative research –more willing (likely) to perform categorical analyses of the information and use packets of information that foster the research –, others who are more purists and from a native point of view try to manipulate the information as little as possible, reaching the conclusion that the best idea is to show the evidence through the voices of the protagonists without later interpretation, and others who –in line with what the reviewers propose – try to look for a productive balance between the two extremes. There is a demand, then, for a different method from the conventional qualitative paradigm, without being limited to a methodology of collecting and analyzing data (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001).

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