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EMBRACING MY MULTIPLE SELVES. ADULT EDUCATION AS A PATH OF UNDERSTANDING

ABSTRACT: In this contribution, I track my professional path as a researcher, using some keywords to identify the main turning points. I try to show that my life – as any life – is the result of encounters, contexts, processes of which I have been part. It is also learning about stories. Growing older, and doing biographical research, I have learnt – and am still learning - to embrace the complexity of my experience, the shadows, the unaccomplished. I am grateful for the mysterious path that brought me, at a point, to do research in adult education. This kind of research is an extraordinary opportunity to become reflexive about learning, about myself as a learner, and as a human being, by answering the questions where, how, and from whom I have learnt? By talking about some stumbling stones and pilgrims I have met on my journey, I try to build a satisfying theory of life. Satisfying for me, of course. In this moment, at least.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, stories, com-position, academic life, relationships.

So, in this world of 1978, we try to run a university and to maintain standards of “excellence” in the face of growing distrust, vulgarity, insanity, exploitation of resources, victimization of persons, and quick commercialism. The screaming voices of greed, frustration, fear, and hate (Bateson, 1979: 242).

I keep saying to myself: this story is not about *me*. I have done the auto/biographical exercise so many times in 30 years, I have accompanied so many and diverse people and groups in (re)constructing their self-narratives, that I have developed a meta-vision of the whole thing. And a meta-vision shows the patterns that connect all stories, especially within a certain culture (Cyrulnik, 2008). Telling your life is a cultural thing; it reveals the context(s) where you belong. Here, I only have these words, in this language – which by the way is not my mother tongue, but a strange form of English that I have learnt mostly by working and reading academic stuff. Maybe, it is not a suitable language for love, or for strolling in meadows, let alone reading poetry. There are constraints in using words, and possibilities. So, writing this chapter is a multiple challenge, in an effort to give a form to ideas, to a representation of my life, of myself, and the understanding that I have built about myself through researching adult education. It is not only a matter of contents, or lack of vocabulary. *Form* is relevant (Bateson, 1972). We learn – we take our form (formation) – by living, and we learn how to shape our discourse on ourselves by *linguaging* (Maturana, 1990; Maturana & Varela, 1987). I like this verb that I met

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in my twenties, and the man who used it – Humberto Maturana, the Chilean biologist and constructivist researcher – has been a durable influencer in my life.

But I am – as I always do – digressing. The premise (which is also the conclusion) of this chapter is: this is *not* about me. It is about the world where I live, the people I have met, the books I have read, and especially the environment of which I am a part, a *dependent* part. Auto/biography is about co-evolution and interdependence. Nothing to do with the development of autonomy, agency, or empowerment, the dominant discourse of adult education. Mhmmm... yet, I have accompanied many people who badly needed to tell their stories, to be seen, listened to, and recognized, using self-narration as a way to claim their own space for existence. It took a while – a *long* while – to acknowledge the same need in me. It took time to realize how much time I spent talking about myself, my experiences, my achievements. Me, me, me. Trying to demonstrate to some audience that I am good enough, that I am the good daughter, student, wife, mother. Performing a successful self through narrative means: this is a global sport of our times, isn't it? And where does it come from? Why did it begin, and become so relevant, that a single life must be represented, worded, pictured, framed, published?

Storytelling, and especially telling stories of the self, is the gift and the doom of our times (Salmon, 2007), when it is shaped by the epistemological insanity of the “Western” culture. I was seventeen when Gregory Bateson published the quotation at the start of this text. And I was ten when he wrote “The cybernetics of ‘Self’: A theory of alcoholism” (Bateson, 1972: 309-337), fundamental reading for me (not at ten, of course) that opened my eyes about the perspective that I had interiorized by living in this society, in these historical times. An individual-centred perspective. Bateson's thesis is:

Alcoholics are philosophers in that universal sense in which all human beings (and all mammals) are guided by highly abstract principles of which they are either quite unconscious, or unaware that the principle governing their perception and action is philosophic. A common misnomer for such principles is “feelings” (Bateson, 1972: 320).

Bateson revealed to me my philosophical self, rooted in the dominant perspective of our society, “Cartesian dualism, the division between Mind and Matter, or, in this case, between conscious will, or ‘self’, and the remainder of the personality” (Bateson, 1972: 313). I was flashed. I realized how “natural” it was for me to adhere to a framework of meaning based on the competitive construction of Self against the Other (be it a person, the environment, or an object of ambivalent desire, as the bottle for the alcoholic). The ideal powerful Self-with-a-big-S, in control of the situation – “the captain of his [!] soul” (Bateson, 1972: 312) brings problems, at many levels. The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous – the most known and maybe effective program for alcoholism – is to recognize that Self is powerless over “the Other” (alcohol). The first

step is surrender, and I cannot keep from thinking that this is a general rule, for all of us. Surely for me. I am powerless against many things, I depend on many “others”. The second step is believing that “a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (Bateson, 1972: 313). So, the experience of defeat brings us to a healthier view, where the myth of self-power is broken by the demonstration of a greater power. It can be the AA group itself. Or God. Or Nature. Nowadays, after many years, I call this step the “transcendence of the Self”, a tentative attitude to take a distance from your own interiorized cultural narrative. The Master story that prevents you from embracing your fragility, your need, your wound.

It is necessary to say aloud who you are. The auto/biographical effort is not aimed to gain more power. I try to keep a distance from the narrative of salvation: “Find your true self, and you will be happy”. My approach to the practice of auto/biography, today, is meant to open possibilities, showing what is *beyond* you. Power is a myth that makes me sceptical of discourses of self-narrative as “empowering” anybody. This has entailed at some point a “change in epistemology, a change in how to know about the personality-in-the-world. And, notably, the change is from an incorrect to a more correct epistemology” (Bateson, 1972: 313).

Reading Bateson when I was twenty started a process of self-reflexivity that is still going on. It is not – not only – a psychological process. It is a deep interrogation of my context, relationships, and the frameworks of meaning that I have inherited. It is a way to recognize learning and deuterio-learning in my life: I have learnt how to be, how to become, how to communicate, how to evolve with my context, with others, and the non-human world. *Formazione* (*Bildung* in Germany, *formation* in France, there is not a word in English for this) means taking a form. So, I can recognize that “I am” an embodied evolving epistemology, and I can see now how choosing an academic life was part of it.

So, as I said: this is not only about me, the selfish, self-reliable, autonomous, powerful me, and hopefully I will be able to write in a way that is not a celebration of this self. I do not need to gain the reader’s benevolence or admiration. I have established a task for the time that I still have to live. The task is: embrace your multiple selves, the good, and the bad, the strong and the weak, the socially acceptable and the parts that you are more scared of.

And remind yourself that all of them are also a construction. In fact, another certitude about auto/biography is that every story is an entanglement of memories and invention.

Epistemology

When I finished my studies in psychology, my father happily said: “Well, now you can be a psychologist”. My answer was: “No way, I want to be an epistemologist”. “What? Is it even a job?”.

I cannot tell why this word became my companion for life. Epistemology can have many meanings, and Bateson himself is very unclear when he uses it. For me, it is the hidden pattern that shapes any conversation, any gesture, any experience. There is always something beyond the surface of things, and it is the way those interacting think. If we accept that life is about interactions, epistemology is the essence of life. The interrelations of human and non-human, of Self and Other, of action and thought, obey unwritten rules, patterns, repetitions. And this intrigues me. Not least, because I am part of that pattern and I depend on it for my survival.

So, when I started a career as a family therapist at the Gregory Bateson Centre in Milan, in the Eighties, psychotherapy was not my focus. My curiosity about families was this: how do people build a sense of “us” by living together? How does such a system evolve over time, in ways that can be very rewarding for its members but also very problematic? Studying the Milan Approach to family therapy (Burbatti & Formenti, 1988) and practising it brought me to reflect on my own families – the original, the one that I was forming – and how wonderful and painful it can be to participate in this collective delicate (un)balanced movement of interdependencies. Adult learning happens when you realize that you are part of a larger system, you are unhappy with how it works, and you do not know what to do. The oppressive nature of family relationships needs to be discovered if we want to grow. It took a lot of energy, and years of psychoanalysis, to learn how I could embrace the me-daughter, the me-sister, the me-wife, the me-mother. Parts of myself that I am not proud of. In the society of performance, I do not know how to perform the good woman that is expected. Well, I am critical of the patriarchal stereotype of a “good woman”, but at the same time a part of me still wants to make others happy. This is not (only) a psychological thing. It is epistemological. It depends on the categories we use to think about relationships.

Another important discovery was *complexity* and *radical constructivism* as a framework that could be used to interpret interactions in human systems (Formenti, 2018). Not only Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana, but Heinz von Foerster (von Foerster, 1984; Foerster & Pörksen, 2002), Francisco Varela (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela, 1984; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2017), Edgar Morin (1990), and many other pilgrims became my favourite readings. All of them were also human beings struggling for meaning: I was lucky to meet these scholars on many occasions and to learn from their authenticity, kindness, and openness. I found some provisional answers to my

problems in the idea that we cooperate in building reality through communication, and communication is a dance with the other and the context, so we can participate in it, but not control it. An eco-systemic view of life started to grow with me, along with practices to embody it (Formenti & Luraschi, 2017).

Our epistemology can change, but it is not only a change of labels or ideas in our minds; this transformation requires a sort of conversion, a total reframing of our perspectives and identities (Formenti & West, 2018). If I look back, now, my epistemological transformation started after a big crisis in 1987, when I painfully had to quit a beloved job in open disagreement with my boss and mentor. This brought depression and despair into a life that had started under the best premises. I left my country to work in Switzerland, at the University of Geneva as a research assistant. For five years, I studied the construction of identity within the frame of “operational epistemology” and “cultural psychology” (Fabbri, Formenti & Munari, 1992), an approach to adult learning inspired by the theories of complexity, Bateson’s work, and Piaget’s structuralist-constructivist method. My mentors in Geneva – Donata Fabbri and Alberto Munari – were investigating the *relationship to knowing* that shapes adult identity and the cognitive strategies used by people to cope with emerging questions, especially at work. After the family system, this brought me to investigate organizations, social systems where interdependence is also the rule but rarely recognized. I became more interested in action and its effects in the world and in ourselves. When von Foerster came to visit us, we discussed his ethical and aesthetical imperatives: “Act always so as to increase the number of choices” and “If you desire to see, learn how to act” (von Foerster, 1984: 60-61). Talking is itself a form of action, and we used the metaphor of “cognitive moves” (Fabbri, Formenti & Munari, 1992) to capture the strategies used by learners to position themselves in relation to a task, a question, knowledge, their environment, *etc.*

I started to be more attentive to this self-positioning of the subject: even when the person is unaware, they take a position, they have a strategy, and an observer can make guesses about it. This became very useful for me some years later, when I created a frame to interpret the dance of reciprocity in educational relationships, where two or more people com-pose their bodies, minds, and souls, to co-evolve in the educational context. The frame describes four different positions that adult learners take in relation to knowledge and to the teacher or educator: a. passive reception, b. task-oriented activation, c. self-directed intentionality or d. playfulness. Each of these positions is also well described in literature on adult learning. They could be seen in a progression from the more passive to the more active, but each of us could take all of them, depending on the context. Similarly, the educator can act as a. the bearer of knowledge, b. a coach, c. an active listener, or d. a playful guide. The co-evolution

or structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1987) between learner and educator can appear as a smooth dance when their positions are complementary (*i.e.*, just what is expected), such as the good lecturer with the quiet listener, or the teacher using active pedagogy with students who are committed to do what is required, or the Rogersian educator with an adult who is ready to express his/her questions, needs, and desires, or the creative workshop facilitator with a participant who is willing to play and let go of expectations. What happens most frequently, however, is desynchronization: the dance cannot be smooth since positions are different and change in time. Besides, most contexts of adult learning entail many people, not just two, all of them starting with different expectations. An awkward dance is an occasion for learning. This framework has been very helpful in researching and teaching around the educational relationship in formal, non-formal and informal contexts (Formenti, 2017).

Researching adults' strategies of self-definition and self-construction (Fabbri & Formenti, 1991) brought me to ask myself: why do I want to study this matter? Why identity? And the answer was clear: I was struggling, I did not feel that I belonged, that I was myself. I felt like a stranger in my own family, I had second thoughts about my marriage, I did not want to live in Switzerland nor to go back to Italy. I guess this pushed me towards auto/biography.

Auto/biography

At the end of my service at Geneva University, I felt very disoriented. I was pregnant, so I knew that the future would call for some adaptation; first of all, trying to repatriate. I guess, now, that I was confusedly seeking for some stability. Going back to Italy, family and friends, was an answer to disorientation. And yet, I felt different, no more belonging to one world. Besides, there was uncertainty about career choices. Five years studying the psychology of education – while still practising and teaching family therapy – had brought me to wanting more and becoming a full-time researcher. But the systemic epistemology was not a thing in the Italian academy, apart from a few family therapists who worked in clinical psychology. It was not for me: I was totally uninterested in the system of psychological care and its increasing medicalization. Learning – adult learning – was my object. The only possibility was to apply for a PhD in General and Social Pedagogy, the disciplinary field in which adult education found its place in the Italian university in the 1990s.

So, here I am, a psychologist and systemic psychotherapist, trying to convince Italian scholars in pedagogy (a community with a strong philosophical and theoretical background, not especially fond of psychologists) that overcoming disciplinary boundaries is not a bad idea, and to convince myself that I can learn how to belong. I am scared,

but my PhD supervisor is convinced that what I have, in fact, done in Geneva is pedagogical and biographic. He pushes me to embrace the emerging area of biographical research, still unknown in Italy, and to apply for the first meeting of a new European Research Network – Life History and Biography – founded by Pierre Dominicé, Peter Alheit, and Agnieszka Bron under the umbrella of ESREA. This meeting will be held in Geneva. I take this as a good sign. I could not know that this network, and the people in it, was to become my academic family forever.

My professional life as a researcher is strongly marked by auto/biographical studies. I use the word with a slash, as I have learnt from British colleagues in Canterbury – Linden West, Hazel Reid, Wilma Fraser, Alan Bainbridge, and many others – to stress the relational and interdependent nature of any effort to gather life histories. An interview, a biographical group, even a written text, are always built in context, inside an ongoing relationship (Cavarero, 2000), where the other – the real and the imagined one – will shape my strategy of self-narration, the contents that I choose to tell and the silenced parts, the meaning that will *emerge* from the whole process. “Emergence” belongs to the systemic complexity theory: in human and social systems, most events cannot be referred to a specific cause, since they are produced by entangled circuits of communication, seen as a circularity of action and feed-back. When we say that the story “has emerged”, we are acknowledging that we are unable to say what exactly has produced it. There is a mystery in the meaning construction of an auto/biographical effort: how and why do I tell my story in this way, to this person or group? What do you – as a researcher or educator – bring in it? How do we together shape ourselves, our relationship, and our common environment, by telling this story in this way?

So, since the very start of my PhD, in 1993, I wanted to study auto/biography as a systemic process (Formenti & Demetrio, 1995) and “a relational journey” (Formenti, 2014), not just a method to gather data. The meeting with Pierre Dominicé (2000) and Marie Christine Josso (1991) in Geneva was inspiring: they were developing a method of collective biographical inquiry with groups of professionals and students of adult education, that became my first model to do something similar in my PhD. Marie-Christine was the first to invite me to write reflexively about my academic path (Formenti, 2000).

For my PhD thesis, I gathered a group of 15 university students from Literature and Philosophy as co-researchers, and we met 10 times in 6 months, plus one individual interview, to explore different narrative creative methods for auto/biographical exploration (self-portraits, oral presentations, imaginary dialogues, chronographies, photonarratives, journals, biographical writing), then we started a phase of co-construction using different ways to produce alternative stories, such as multiple styles of writing inspired by Queneau’s *Exercises in style* (1947), writing alternative versions and integrations of the “same” story. At the end, we implemented a process of group reflexivity,

using Kundera's suggestions to re-write each biographical text in the form of a *Bildung* novel, a fictional text based on the art of "radical pruning", the art of "polyphonic counterpoint", and the art of writing "just words" (Kundera, 2020). I published that work in a book (Formenti, 1998) that started a new tradition in Italy about doing "autobiographic pedagogy" in groups, a practice based on five concepts: unicity, constraint, multiplicity, reflexivity, and context. Since then, I have facilitated hundreds of groups, in many parts of Italy and Europe, as well as in my trips to Chile and South Korea. With a group of professionals, we wrote a collective book about "traversing care" (*attraversare la cura* in the original Italian), using writing as a way to develop our capacity to care for each other (Formenti, 2009). Writing, reading and performing together is the part of my work that I enjoy most. It is a form of research, indeed, but it took time to legitimate it. And many colleagues told me, "this is not research, it is intervention". The binary separation of research and intervention is a problem of Western epistemology that haunts our academy.

Auto/biography in a group is my methodological backbone when I teach and invite adults (students, professionals, parents...) to develop their reflexivity. Working-with, in a participatory way, is my favourite setting with adults. I am far less naïve now, though, after many explorations with different groups and situations, some of them successful, some disastrous, some useless, if I consider that adult education should be about developing consciousness, criticality, self-positioning, and recognition of the eco-systemic nature of life. I cannot force anyone, let alone myself, to transform.

Com-position

In 1999, at 38, I became a professional academic – it was not intended, it emerged from a set of fortuitous conditions, and somehow I did not think that I deserved it. In that period, I was starting to use more traditional tools for research, such as biographical interviews and field observation. I realized that auto/biography has limits, when it comes to a complex understanding of human lives and groups. Even the systemic framework can become a prison, especially when it develops in very intellectual and abstract ways.

I was discovering (after my two pregnancies and births) the power of the body and presentational knowledge in sustaining adult learning. I worked very intensely for a decade with Ivano Gamelli, an Italian scholar who was developing an original framework for embodied pedagogy, with all ages but especially with adults. We organised residential workshops in the country, alternating embodied experiences, auto/biographical writing, and improvised performances. We wrote a book (Formenti & Gamelli, 1998) and several papers on those experiences.

I was trying to find a way to combine different languages, perspectives and paradigms. I started to use “sight” instead of “paradigm” – the metaphor of seeing something from a perspective (Formenti & West, 2018) seemed better than thinking in a paradigmatic way. I was also looking for new words to describe the dance of relationships as a reciprocal positioning and to frame research as a collaborative instead of competitive endeavour. This is how I stumbled on Heron’s (1996) work on co-operative inquiry: it was amazing how all the pieces were coming together, suddenly. Heron was describing the process that I had developed in almost 20 years of explorations! He gave names to what was unnamed before, and this fuelled my creativity and intentionality. I started to call my approach “com-positional” (Formenti, 2008; 2009; 2017).

Writing a life is a composition (Bateson, 1989). A conversation is a com-position. A workshop is a com-position, in reciprocity. This is how I see a family, a theory, an organization. They are systems, yes, but if I call them “com-positions” I can be more curious about the process, the juxtaposition of different parts, the dynamic forms that transform, constantly, and the relationships between the details and the overall changing atmosphere. I also become more interested in the artistic, expressive, aesthetic dimensions of life.

Academic life

My learning path does not entirely fit with the expectations of contemporary academy. When I entered this world, I felt like “a fish out of water” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 127), because of my class origins, professional status, age, gender... I had the competence and profile to be habilitated as a researcher, but I did not possess the language, habitus, social capital needed to make a career. Besides, I did not feel entitled, or deserving recognition. This made my voice very feeble when it came to name oppression. It took years to recognize that it was not *my* problem, but it came from the structures implemented in the organization.

My works and ways of doing were praised by students, peers, and professionals, but dismissed by powerful figures. I will not tell here the sad details of inter-acting with powerful older men – and some women – who tried in different ways to push me back. I am really grateful to feminist researchers such as Barbara Merrill, Edmée Ollagnier, Darlene Clover, and to critical scholars in adult education who gave me the words and lenses that I lacked to read those events and my own reaction to them. I am also grateful that, by proposing paths of critical auto/biography to others, I have learnt a lot from them about my experience of being a non-traditional academic, and the beauty of choosing your own way of doing research, your voice as a researcher, and celebrating it.

What gave me strength were several nurturing meetings and enduring relationships with sensitive, brilliant, and passionate researchers in adult education – I cannot mention all the members of the lively community that is the Life History and Biography Network of ESREA, it would be a long list – but I have to mention one life-changing friendship and collaboration, with West (1996; 2016), who encouraged me to take a position, using my voice and authentic self to be active in the academic community. Thanks to him and Edmée Ollagnier, I became a network convenor, then a member of ESREA's Steering Committee, and finally, I found the bravery to propose myself as a Chairperson of this society.

I first met Linden in 1994 in Vienna. I remember a sunny day, a bench in the park, and him – a total stranger to me – listening for half an hour or more to the story of my very recent experience of becoming a mother. That quality of listening, the care for relationships and contexts that Linden pursued on every occasion – in doing auto/biographical interviews, as well as in supervising PhD students, in starting an Erasmus project with 75 people from 5 countries, in opening every annual meeting of the Life History and Biography Network – became a role model for me. He asked me difficult questions, he challenged my epistemology: as a psychoanalyst he was very engaged with subjectivity and identity, but I refused to tackle the unconscious, I felt more comfortable in looking at the “visible world”. So, our friendship grew little by little, and became a shared pilgrimage, walking together on the same path in search of meaning and beauty, in a landscape that can be very scary, violent, and meaningless. We developed together a dialogic transformative perspective on adult education (Formenti & West, 2018) that recognizes differences, conflicts, and struggles as necessary to learning.

The meetings of the Life History and Biography Network, that we convened jointly from 2005 to 2021, became an evolving space where a community of researchers could explore the construction of a set of shared values: relationality, listening, creativity, openness. We started to reframe auto/biographical inquiry as a path that goes beyond the narrative dimension, and words (Evans, 2016), involving the body and material/ecological context (Formenti, West & Horsdal, 2014; Bainbridge, Formenti & West, 2021). We insisted on the need to build stories that could make a difference in the world, at a micro, meso, and macro level (Formenti & West, 2016). Thanks to Linden, I came to know other pilgrims, such as Winnicott, and he met “my” Bateson. The composition of our views is still going on.

This story is partial and unfinished. I have lived – and still live – many contradictions and the need to compose them. The academic identity is demanding, the institutional constraints are far from guaranteeing a good enough learning space for everybody. When I am teaching, supervising, or assessing a thesis, I feel a tension between trusting the creativity, motivation, and intelligence of the adults in front of me, and asking them to

comply with rules that may suffocate or mortify that sparkle. When I see the damage created by neoliberal and bureaucratic rules implemented in the system, I would like to be the kind of person that is able to say aloud this is wrong. I know why I am still very shy, on many occasions, but I am working on it.

Meanwhile, I am getting older, and fittingly I was given the task of coordinating an interdisciplinary research group on healthy and active ageing. I hope to bring complexity into this heterogeneous group and invite us all to search for wisdom and meaning, beside the new neoliberal mantra of “successful ageing”. As I said, I want to compose and embrace all my selves, now the older learner is coming to the forefront. Let’s see where this will bring me.

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