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MY ITINERARIES AND EXPERIENCES IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL AND NARRATIVE UNIVERSE: BETWEEN DESIRE AND REALITY

ABSTRACT: In this text, which attempts to relate my professional history, my international experiences and my written contributions in recent years, I present my itinerary as a researcher and educator in the biographical-narrative field over the last two decades. This contribution addresses, from a personal and subjective point of view, the recent changes in the biographical universe referred to globalisation, teamwork, international collaboration, the creation of networks and the progressive consolidation, legitimisation and maturation of narrative approaches. I refer to the French-speaking model of the *Histoires de Vie en Formation*, as a social, epistemological and methodological proposal that seems to me essential to further deepen the biographical in educational contexts. I also characterise some important paradigms of social and educational research, which are of great relevance for the further construction of the biographical-narrative field. I conclude the text with some comments on current challenges and emerging issues in the biographical field.

KEYWORDS: biographical research, narrative, research, higher education, Spain, networking, teaching.

In this text, I explore my itineraries and experiences in the biographical-narrative field, offering an account of its origins, developments, changes and achievements, within the social, professional, institutional, scientific and associative contexts in which I have been developing my work in this field. Readers may find analogies with their own itineraries, experiences and future plans.

Despite the many important differences and nuances of research method terminology that need be recognised, I will employ different terms here, such as *autobiographical approaches*, *biographical-narrative approaches* or, simply, *narratives*, *biographies* or *life histories* to be more comprehensive and inclusive.

Emerging contexts

To describe the beginning of my itinerary, I need to place readers in my particular context. I belong to a generation that grew up in Andalusia, in the south of Spain, in the final years of General Franco's dictatorship, a regime that held power in Spain between 1939 (the year in which a three-year civil war ended) and 1977 (when democratic elections were held, leading a year later to the approval of the 1978 Democratic Constitution). I come from a working-class family in a rural Andalusian context, with low economic and educational capital. My generation represents an important moment of relative

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and limited upward social mobility, which made possible the economic development of the 1960s and 1970s, during the last 15 years of Franco's dictatorship. In some cases, such as my own, this social mobility meant obtaining a public scholarship to be able to continue education and even to study at university. In my case, this social mobility was favoured by my parents' decision to leave their village in the province of Granada to live in Seville. It was in Seville that I studied pedagogy at university between 1975 and 1980. The beginning of my studies coincided with the death of General Franco (20 November 1975), so those were years of very intense political and social transition, which gave birth to a new democratic era. We experienced this historic moment at the university in a hopeful and utopian way. Despite the shortcomings and limitations of this transition, it was possible to create a peaceful space of coexistence and progress in Spain, which has lasted for more than four decades. After my university studies, I worked as a primary school teacher for eight years in the 1980s. In 1990, I started working in the Faculty of Education at the University of Seville, where I continue to work to date.

Although my focus will be on the 21st century, I need to begin by telling how I came to life histories. During my time as a primary school teacher and my first years as a university teacher, I concentrated on educational theories. In this context, I was intensively engaged in research on the pedagogy of Célestin Freinet, a French pedagogue and teacher, who strongly influenced educational innovation, within the New School movement, which he reformulated with a social and cooperative approach under the label of "Modern School" (Freinet, 1971). Alongside Freinet, I was also interested in John Dewey and Paulo Freire (*e.g.* Dewey, 1972; Freire, 1990)¹. These three pedagogues, who developed three different versions of contemporary educational change, remain important references for me. During these years, roughly between 1980 and 1990, my interests were therefore mainly theoretical. That is to say, it was individual work, centred on reading and writing about important 20th century educationalists. In practical terms, this mainly involved isolated work, which I carried out in the university library and at home.

The completion of a master's thesis on Freinet was the central moment of this whole process of theoretical work, always combined with my full-time job as a primary school teacher. I submitted this research on Freinet for national awards (1986) and was very surprised to learn that the Spanish Ministry of Education had awarded me a National Prize for Educational Research. The Ministry published this research as a book (González-Monteagudo, 1988). This changed my professional life quite a lot, because I started to get some requests to participate in university events and to

¹ Here, as in the majority of references given in the text, the aim is primarily to indicate the texts of authors that were the first of their works I discovered and read, and is intended to provide some orientation only.

write in professional journals, always with reference to Célestin Freinet, about whom I inevitably became a *specialist*. In fact, this award was the starting point of a personal reflection, which led me to leave my permanent position as a teacher and to apply in 1990 for a contract at the University of Seville.

During this initial stage, I developed an interest in theoretical and historical pedagogical research. But there came a time when this way of working, centred on educational theories, became too narrow and limited for me. When I began to think about my doctoral thesis project, already working at the university, I decided that it was time to make an important change to my previous itinerary. Thus, I looked for a field of work in which to develop an educational ethnography, breaking with my previous way of working, which privileged the theoretical. My doctoral thesis was ethno-biographical research on primary school teachers, with a focus on educational innovation and the relationship between educational theories and practices. I remember that around 1992 I read for the first time a book on qualitative research, Judith Preissle Goetz and Margaret Diane LeCompte's (1984) work on educational ethnography, twelve years after finishing my university degree in Pedagogy in 1980. This book, which I bought at the end of my university studies, had been waiting patiently in my personal library for more than a decade. This moment was the beginning of an important change in my way of working in pedagogy. For me, ethnography represented an easy way, because of the tradition I already enjoyed, to get into qualitative research in the field of education. But I, as a young researcher aspiring to create my own professional identity, wanted to go further, trying to innovate and break new ground. In this very context, a late friend and colleague, told me about life histories and, in particular, lent me one book by Gaston Pineau (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983). This was the starting point for a growing interest in biographical and narrative approaches, which I incorporated into my doctoral thesis, in the form of biographical interviews, exploring the relationships between the personal and professional lives of educators. In 1993, I undertook a systematic and extensive reading of French, English and Spanish texts on narratives in social and educational research, which I integrated into an excruciatingly extensive literature review, included in my doctoral thesis. At that time, a clear interest in life histories was beginning to emerge in Spain, reflected in the completion of several doctoral theses. I was fortunate to have close contact during this period with Jorge Larrosa, who was publishing intelligent philosophical essays on the relationship between literature and education (Larrosa, 2003).

New interests do not usually emerge completely and out of nowhere, at a given moment in time. They have their roots and their history, the product of experiences lived over time, which accumulate and bear fruit under special conditions and contexts. Looking back, I must point out that biographies and autobiographies have interested

me since my time as a university student, particularly those autobiographies of rebellious, iconoclastic, innovative characters who have swum against the tide. This was the case, for example, with the autobiographies of the social critic José María Blanco White (2007), a Sevillian who lived in England and criticised the closed, provincial and Catholic Andalusian society of his time, and the Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo, who died in 2017 (Goytisolo, 1985).

The truth is that from the mid-1990s onwards I constructed a new identity for myself as a researcher and teacher, in which the biographical began to play an increasingly important role. In the last years of the last century, I published several articles on life histories and educational ethnography, using the materials of my PhD. Parallel to these publications, I began to occasionally use life histories with some of my university students, learning directly from Isabel López Górriz (who was the only close colleague using these approaches in my faculty two decades ago) and deepening my knowledge of the French-speaking contributions of the *Histoires de vie en formation* movement (Pineau & Le Grand, 1996). In the Spanish context, I must highlight the importance of the pioneering contributions of Antonio Bolívar and his team at the University of Granada, who have done much to consolidate, legitimise and disseminate biographical approaches (Bolívar, Domingo & Fernández, 2001).

Biographical-narrative itineraries in research and teaching

In analysing my personal and professional itinerary, I recognise the importance of relevant transitional moments that sometimes arise from coincidence or from particular conditions or situations, over which we often have little control. One such moment was submitting my Master's thesis for a national educational research award, which I did because I bumped into a teaching colleague who informed me about this possibility and who convinced me to apply, seeing my initial reluctance. This award was, as we have seen, the main trigger for my decision to leave schoolteaching and start my time as a university lecturer. Another important moment of transition was meeting Isabel López Górriz and, more specifically, the moment when she lent me Gaston Pineau's books. These readings reaffirmed the idea that it was possible for me to include a biographical dimension in my doctoral thesis project. A third important moment was in 1999 when I met, by chance, in the bar of the faculty of education, my colleague Bettina Dybbroe from the University of Roskilde in Denmark (see for example Dybbroe & Ollagnier eds., 2003). This anecdotal fact is the basis of my first stay outside Spain, at the University of Roskilde, in 1999. At the time, I didn't speak English, I could only read English, which was a major limitation. However, a paper I presented in Roskilde was my first publication in English (González-Monteagudo, 2000).

The return from Roskilde was hard, pondering whether there was *still* time to learn English (at the time, I was 41 years old). In fact, I took the decision to learn English, but when I was able to put this plan into practice, I was afraid of the unknown, so to speak, and I put this project on indefinite hold. Instead, I decided to go to Paris, to improve my French, a language I had studied in my secondary school and in which I had read a lot during my research on Freinet. With the help of Ettore Gelpi (responsible for adult education at UNESCO (Gelpi, 1985) and René Barbier (Barbier, 1997), I spent the spring of 2001 at the University of Paris 8 in Saint-Denis, north of Paris. It was my first long stay abroad. This trip marked a before and after in my relations with the biographical. Jean-Louis Le Grand (Pineau & Le Grand, 1996) was a fundamental reference on this trip, and still is today. He introduced me to his doctoral thesis and his work on life histories and proposed that I become a member of the *Association Internationale des Histoires de Vie en Formation* (ASIHVIF at <http://www.asihvif.com>). In this association I met many colleagues. I read their books, I was inspired by the way they worked on life histories and I found a formidable group of people. Gaston Pineau, in particular – his humanism, tolerance, modesty, capacity for animation and cooperative work, his originality, charisma, and his approachability – have left a deep impression on me.

Between 2001 and 2004 I was in Paris a number of times. This period helped me to deepen my knowledge of French-speaking biographical approaches and to establish collaborative relationships with different colleagues. In this context I was able, too, to meet Christine Delory-Momberger and read her intelligent and original contributions on the biographical field and the processes of biographisation in today's societies (Delory-Momberger, 2000). On the occasion of Pineau's retirement in 2007, I was able to present a paper on *artefact-biographies, i.e.*, biographical training based on working with objects for the biographical conference held in Tours (González-Monteaudo, 2011). The congress closed with a memorable lecture by Gaston. I have to admit that I was deeply moved listening to him, so that, to my surprise, I spent the last minutes of the talk in tears. I have not talked much here about emotions, but it is clear that the biographical reveals to us the deep emotions of the singular self and of human groups in their interactions, conflicts, shared longings and questionings.

Epistemology and methodology: some questions

This is the moment to pause to address some epistemological and methodological questions. The French-speaking paradigm of the *Histoires de Vie en Formation* has been the model that has influenced me most strongly, providing me with a way of working with the biographical in formative contexts that seems to me innovative, critical and cooperative. The members of this current were grouped around the *Association Internationale*

des Histoires de Vie en Formation (ASIHVIF), based in Paris. In 1983, Gaston Pineau published, in collaboration with Marie-Michèle, *Produire sa vie. Autoformation et autobiographie* (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983), a suggestive and innovative book, which marked the beginning of life histories in adult education in the French-speaking field. In this work, Pineau (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983) worked on the concepts of self-training and life histories, hitherto conceived of as unrelated fields, and he proposed the need to develop adult education on the basis of the use of life histories as a research and training tool, and this would affect the researcher, the educator and the adult trainees alike. Criticising subjectivism, individualism and liberalism, he conceived self-training as the appropriation of the adult's own training in an emancipatory and critical perspective. This was the beginning of an experiential and existential formative approach that has been tenaciously developed over the last three decades. In his 1983 book, Pineau (Pineau & Marie-Michèle, 1983) reviewed the literary, sociological, psychological and anthropological uses of life histories, while considering that the use of life histories in adult education made possible an experiential and democratic approach, unifying research and training, which conceives the researcher and the actor as collaborators, in a horizontal and non-hierarchical relationship.

The life history method finds a very important application in the field of self-education. Self-education is understood as a vital process of constructing the self and the life story as one of the possible means of carrying out this process. For Pineau, this democratising strategy is situated within the framework of a new society, a new individual and a new way of thinking.

The French association ASIHVIF sees training as emancipation. The life histories aim to reinforce the subject's power of action over themselves and their environment, associating it with the construction of the knowledge produced. The research models proposed are qualitative, multidisciplinary and collaborative. The separation of disciplines is explicitly rejected and collaboration between trainers, researchers and adults in training is advocated in all phases and contents of the process. The contributions of ASIHVIF members constitute today an indispensable legacy for working with life histories in formal education, adult education, processes of validation and recognition of experience, self-education, communities and collective life, the elderly, social marginality, the health environment, historical testimony and other fields.

In Spain, during these early years of the 21st century, we have experienced an important development of biographical and narrative approaches, which have been legitimised in the field of education in an important way. The narrative turn, exemplified by Jerome Bruner (1997), Paul Ricoeur (2000), Daniel Bertaux (1997), Gaston Pineau (2000) and so many other researchers, sociologists, psychologists and pedagogues, has become a reference perspective in the social, disciplinary, research and educational panorama.

In the first decade of the 21st century I tried to develop this narrative perspective in my work, both in training and in research, and I have been developing since 2001 an intense activity with my students at the Faculty of Education in Seville, centred on the proposal, realisation and accompaniment of the educational autobiography. This proposal takes up the principles of the paradigm of the *Histoires de Vie en Formation*, adapting them to my particular context, particularly in relation to the high number of students per course, whose average has been 70 students. Over the course of two decades, almost 2,000 students in my faculty have completed the educational autobiography with me. Alongside this activity, I have carried out experiential biographical training with undergraduate and master's degree groups at universities in different countries, including experiences in Portugal, Italy, Brazil and others. In the social and community field, I have worked on life histories with intercultural educators (in collaboration with an association supporting immigrants) and with rural teachers in Morocco. In addition to these experiential trainings and workshops, I have held seminars, courses and conferences in numerous institutions, particularly in universities outside Spain. These experiences have convinced me of the powerful influence of biographical methods in transforming perspectives, visions, identities and itineraries of trainees, both young and adult, both in formal educational spaces and in social, community and informal contexts.

I should highlight, too, projects based on the development of biographical interviews with students and university teachers. These fieldwork experiences in the Dominican Republic and Germany offered me a unique opportunity to understand and learn to handle more correctly the intercultural nuances of communication, discourse, narration and multilingualism.

We know that we live in the age of globalisation. Many sectors of human activity have been globalised: the economy, trade and consumption; transport, travel, migration and mobility of all kinds; science, knowledge and learning; information and communication technologies and media. In this context, the first decade of our 21st century is the decade of my linguistic, teaching and research globalisation. At the end of 2003, I spent a month and a half in New York City, to study English. This relatively late training allowed me to participate for the first time in 2005 in an international congress on biographical research, organised by ESREA, using English as my working language. This approach to English was greatly helped by several stays in England: in Canterbury, with the help of Linden West (1996); another in London, with the support of Nod Miller (Boud & Miller, 1996); and finally in Coventry, with the collaboration of Barbara Merrill (1999). Linden West and Barbara Merrill, in fact, have been instrumental in my international and biographical learning, both of them always generous in sharing their experiences and approaches. This openness to the international was

completed by a stay in 2006 in Milan (Italy), with the support of Laura Formenti, from whom I learned a lot about systemic and creative approaches (Formenti, 1998).

These trips, encounters and experiences opened my mind and projected me into a perspective of greater collaborative work, in groups and networks. A fundamental factor has been to join biographical associations such as ESREA, ASIHVIF and BIOgraph, which cover, respectively, the English, French and Portuguese-speaking fields. My interest in language learning also encouraged these processes, as I came to realise that I could play a positive role as a mediator between colleagues from different languages and countries. I have played this role on numerous occasions, facilitating meetings, acting as a translator, building bridges between them. All this is also reflected in my work as a translator of texts. Indeed, I have translated into Spanish (from English, French, Italian and Portuguese) numerous texts, including works by Ettore Gelpi, René Barbier, Jean-Louis Le Grand, Linden West, Francis Lesourd, H el ene B ezille, Gaston Pineau, Laura Formenti, Elizeu Clementino de Souza, Bettina Dybbroe and others. Most of these texts were published in Spain.

Participation in international congresses has been a constant activity over the last 20 years. Congresses are language schools, spaces for sharing research, settings for friendly and informal socialising, ideal spaces for deepening intercultural sensitivity and occasions for sightseeing and getting to know the world. My participation, for example, in four Brazilian congresses between 2008 and 2014, four CIPAs (*Congresso Internacional de Pesquisa Auto/biogr fica*) allowed me to observe, understand and appropriate a rich and complex image of Brazilian education and culture, within the contexts of these types of congresses: the universities; the participants in these scientific and academic events; the groups, entities and individuals who organise these meetings; the cities in which they have been held, all four so different, each a microcosm of the great Brazil that is torn between tradition and modernity, between harmony and conflict, between inclusive citizenship and inequalities of impressive dimensions.

These congresses have had many meanings for me. Obviously, they have been congresses in the usual sense of the term. That is, this means something to do with meetings, assemblies, scientific committees, participation as a listener or actor in a multitude of conferences, symposia, debates, round tables, workshops, papers, concerts, theatrical performances, book presentations, cultural and other activities. I have particularly appreciated the ability of the organisers and participants in the CIPAs to focus on processes, on the balance between academic-professional time and personal and convivial time, on the need to evaluate the events, on the inclusive and communitarian approach that characterises these meetings. These have been intense times, full of encounters with people and groups that have left a mark and a strong influence on me, which I have had to integrate into my understanding of training and human life. Unlike many of

the foreigners who have participated in the CIPAs, I have cultivated a clear interest in the Portuguese language, which I have learnt and continue to learn in an informal and 'mundialogante' way, as Gaston Pineau would say. The stays in Brazil to participate in the CIPAS have also been for me informal Portuguese courses, taking advantage of the very contexts of the congresses, but also reading the press, watching television, informal conversations with friends and colleagues, attending regular classes at the universities where the congresses were held, and the continuous use of the dictionary to expand my vocabulary. This way of approaching the language of the great Brazil has been a formidable experience of linguistic interculturality, dialogic humanism and hermeneutic exercise, which, I feel, has made me grow personally and professionally.

Another evidence of this collaborative work concerns publications: coordination of journal issues, books, articles and other texts. Already in 2004 I coordinated a thematic dossier on life histories for the Spanish journal *Diálogos. Educación y formación de personas adultas*. But the most decisive moment on this topic came four years later, when I was commissioned to coordinate and edit a monographic issue of the adult education journal of the University of Paris 8, *Pratiques de Formation / Analyses*, devoted to life histories in Europe (González-Monteagudo, 2008). In my "Note de synthèse", the opening article of the monographs in the French journals, I reviewed the literature on life histories in education in Europe, both thematically and geographically. The bibliography of this article included around 450 references, showing the variety, complexity, richness and maturity of the biographical field in formal and informal educational settings. I believe it was this work that legitimised me, at least in France, as an *international specialist* in life histories in education. At the invitation of Gaston Pineau, I published a first book in 2011, in his Life histories collection of L'Harmattan, on life histories in Spain (González-Monteagudo ed., 2011). Four years later, in 2015, I coordinated a second book, also for L'Harmattan, on life histories in Latin America (González-Monteagudo ed., 2015). The coordination in 2008 of the aforementioned journal and the publication of these two books were decisive factors that led to several stays as a visiting professor in Paris, Lille, Créteil, Tours and Rennes, with the support of Jean-Louis Le Grand, Jean Clénet, Mokhtar Kaddouri, Hélène Bézille, Jérôme Éneau and other colleagues.

The biographical field and the major paradigms

In the "Note de synthèse" mentioned above, I devoted an extensive section to the main paradigms with which life histories in education can work, trying to help make explicit the perspectives that are often kept implicit or not sufficiently reflected upon.

Interest in explicitly relating social and psychological theories to life histories is relatively recent, and in the case of education is in its early stages. Among the perspectives I will mention are post-positivist neorealism; neo-Marxist critical theory; psychoanalysis and narrative psychology; hermeneutics; post-structuralism (González-Monteagudo, 2008). In my intellectual and research itinerary I have been interested in all these approaches, particularly when they are used to construct subjective, communitarian, critical perspectives and utopias towards equality, in a context of relativist and pluralist epistemologies.

Postpositivism and neorealism

Postpositivism and neorealism constitute a modernised and attenuated version of positivism, as they continue to maintain prediction and control as the goals of research. Postpositivism insists on relative justification, subject to criticism and revision, in line with Popperian postulates. In this nomothetic perspective, critical realism, an objectivist epistemology based on falsifiability and a manipulative methodology, but with modifications, are defended. This implies the collection of information on the point of view of social actors and on the situational context. Among the different approaches to personal documents, the nomothetic perspective aims to derive from the analysis of human documents explanations of the phenomena studied, sometimes even quantifying and relating different variables, by categorising and classifying biographical accounts so that it is possible to contrast the phenomena analysed with the initial hypotheses. This approach is present in the methodology of the *récits de vie* disseminated by Daniel Bertaux since the 1970s (Bertaux, 1997).

Neo-marxism and critical theory

The second paradigm evoked here is neo-Marxism and critical theory. Very little attention has been paid to the connection between life histories and critical theory, despite Habermas's emphasis in his *Theory of Communicative Action* on hermeneutic and interactionist perspectives (Habermas, 1999). Frankfurt School critical theorists draw on the German philosophical legacy of Marx, Kant, Hegel and Weber. In particular, they align themselves with Marx in denouncing the injustice, inequality and domination present in advanced capitalist Western societies. This reconsideration of certain Marxist themes has meant that the work of Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse can be framed within a neo-Marxist tradition of social thought. An important part of the current critical approach finds its inspiration in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989), a continuation of the legacy of the so-called first generation of Frankfurt philosophers. In this author, genuine and undistorted enlightenment implies an understanding of

the experiences and understandings of all participants, open and free communication guided by freedom of discourse, and the development of a common orientation for action. Authors such as Kemmis and Giroux have developed pedagogical contributions based on this neo-Marxist tradition (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 1988; Giroux, 1990). It is clear that biographical approaches are close in purpose and methodology to critical participatory action research, subjecting lived experience to continuous questioning, usually in group contexts (Dominicé, 2000).

Psychoanalytical and psychological approaches

The third paradigm refers to psychoanalysis, narrative psychology and personal development approaches. The case history approach played a fundamental role in the development of Freud's psychoanalysis, which made cases such as *Dora* or *Johnny* famous. In a historically parallel way to the development of historicist and phenomenological currents, Freud questioned the gnoseological and methodological assumptions of the psychology of his time (McAdams, 1988). His idiographic epistemological position (although oriented towards an explanation of human behaviour) has had a great influence. Psychobiography and psychohistory (McAdams, 1988) emerged mainly from psychoanalytical approaches. In this field, the relationship of personality to the work of art, to political behaviour and to the change of collective identity (*i.e.* the study of personality in its relationship to the artist, the politician and the charismatic leader) is studied. Among the psychologists who have defended and used the method of life histories, Allport, author of *Letters from Jenny* (Allport ed., 1965), among other works, should be mentioned first and foremost. Allport's subtle analysis shows the advantages that can be gained from the biographical approach in the development of psychological knowledge. Dynamic psychologists, continuing the task initiated by Freud, have explored human feelings in depth, using a wide variety of theoretical and technical approaches, relying, among other resources, on verbal communication, free associations, dreams, the body, drawing, theatre, the group and family relationships. Today, the hybridisation of research, training, personal development and therapy is evident in many of the publications on life histories (see, for example, González-Monteaugudo, 2008).

The hermeneutic approach

The hermeneutic approach is the fourth paradigm I discuss. It is the philosophical and, in part, methodological foundation of interpretivism in the social sciences. Hermeneutics is an ontological theory of understanding. It is oriented towards qualitative analysis and focuses on language and the understanding of meaning by taking into account the context in which it is produced. Hermeneutics is a very influential perspective in

life histories, both in Germanic and other European contexts. Gadamer, building on Heidegger, undertakes a hermeneutic exploration of historical being as it manifests itself in the language tradition (Gadamer, 1993; 1994). This implies a departure from both subjectivism and rationalist and positivist objectivism. Understanding takes place in the happening of a tradition and is thus a relationship between the interpreting subject and the text or object being interpreted. The interpreter approaches texts and others not as a *tabula rasa*, but as a full *tabula*, full of prejudices, expectations and ideas. The initial interpretative sketch involves the outline of the meaning of the text. A subsequent analysis of the text, and of the context, will allow us to gauge the validity of the first interpretative attempt, opening up the possibility of a second, fuller interpretation. The interpretative task is an infinite and possible task. The interpreter must be sensitive to the otherness of the text and speak in order to listen to the text or to the other. Gadamer insists again and again on the logic of question and answer and on the fact that nothing can be stated if it is not a function of an answer to a question (Gadamer, 1993). From this perspective, in the interpretative task there is no apprehension, but communication. This communication takes place between the researcher and the researched and between the researchers themselves. In the French-speaking world, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics has had a considerable influence on theoretical debates on life histories for the last three decades (Ricoeur, 2000). In recent years, the influence is beginning to become evident in the Anglo-Saxon field as well. It is evident that there is a strong, though often unspoken, influence of hermeneutics on a significant part of auto/biographical research and training.

Poststructuralism and postmodernism

The last paradigm is poststructuralism and postmodernism. Norman Denzin's contributions (see Denzin, 1989) on interpretative biography, approached from the perspective of postmodernist interactionism, succeeded in condensing the main postmodernist arguments of European thought and in drawing from them relevant implications for reorienting, within the Anglo-Saxon sphere, the preceding style of biographical research. This perspective insists on discussing how biographical texts are read and written as biased productions imbued with class and gender values. Human documents are fictional in nature, as the persons reflected in these accounts are created through writing, oral narration and other discursive systems. The meaning of a life is given in the text that describes it. This meaning is socially constructed and is shaped by narrative convention and cultural ideology. Therefore, the one-sided insistence on the problem of truth and coherence is meaningless. Feminist research and epistemology have been very influential in understanding representation and writing as political, emotional and gender-dependent activities. Feminism has drawn attention to subjectivity and personal experience and,

in this sense, has been an important element in the development of auto/biographical approaches, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon field (see Lather, 1992). Michel Foucault's influential contribution (Foucault, 1990), which emphasises the suspect social and discursive functions of the hermeneutics of the subject, has encouraged discussion of the ideological and normative uses of biographical work. In recent years, Foucault's work is having a notable influence on British narrative research from postmodernist, feminist and Cultural Studies approaches (West, 1996).

These five epistemological and methodological perspectives seem to me to remain clearly topical. We have a lot of work to do in the coming years to better identify, justify, make explicit and communicate our underlying assumptions and paradigms when working within the biographical-narrative universe. This is an obvious challenge, on which relatively little progress has been made in recent years.

Itineraries and experiences of the last 15 years

Earlier I spoke about globalisation and its different dimensions. I would like to come back to this point to discuss the European research and intervention projects in which I have been involved. Between 2008 and 2021 I have been part of international consortia composed of academic partners (such as universities) and non-academic partners (such as third sector associations), which have competed at European level and obtained funding for the proposed projects. Most of these projects have involved colleagues with a strong interest in biographical-narrative approaches. A fundamental activity has been the development of biographical interviews in different European countries, which have subsequently been worked on in the national language in which they were conducted and also in English, in order to compare the data produced between the different national teams. In these transnational projects, we have used biographical interviews and focus groups in different contexts and fields. In some cases, we have been able to design, develop and evaluate training activities based on narrative and biographical methodologies in formal school and community settings. These exciting international experiences of research and intervention clearly show the changes we are experiencing in the social and educational field, where we are moving from a more artisanal, local and isolated research to a more professional, demanding, collaborative and transnational research.

The institutional contexts, too, of my research work are undoubtedly of great relevance for a better understanding of this text. The last two decades have seen major changes in the Spanish university context. The emphasis on competition, productivity and accountability has greatly increased. My professional life has, of course, been influenced by these trends. In parallel to a progressive decrease in the number of my

annual teaching hours, I have had to enter into working dynamics that I did not like, but which were necessary to ensure good conditions for my work. The strong pressure to publish scientific articles on the Web of Science and Scopus rankings has been a central feature of recent years. In my case, for two decades I had not paid attention to this issue. But in the last decade, I changed over to the publication of such articles, which in Spain (and most likely where you are) are currently the main basis for the positive assessment of research. Unfortunately, this approach has developed a very narrow and reductionist conception of research, focused on productivity.

Final remarks and challenges

In this final section, I wish to list some thoughts by way of taking stock of these past years. I also offer some reflections on the current moment, recent changes, emerging challenges and prospects for the future.

The first thing that strikes me when I look back is the variety of subjects in which I have gradually become involved, always within the narrative field or in sectors that have a strong narrative component. My biographical publications in the 21st century, many of them the product of collaborative work with other colleagues, include: writing, literature and the fictionalisation of the biographical experience (with specific works on Célestin Freinet, Frank McCourt, Winfried Sebald and Mario Vargas Llosa); biographical-narrative and oral history interviews; social and intercultural mediation and the training of mediators; academically backward, non-traditional and disadvantaged students; university inclusion of the Roma population; international students; academic mobility of migrants; (auto)biographical training; educational autobiographies, artefact-biographies; photobiography; family trees and family narratives; recognition and validation of experience; narrative mediation to improve reflexivity and mentalisation; migrations, intercultural diversities and migrant minors; gender violence among migrant women; ruralities; educational inequalities; transformative and experiential learning; entrepreneurs' narratives; comparative perspectives on educational actors and groups; biographical-narrative paradigms; European and transnational projects; collaborative networks and *networking*.

Biographical-narrative work is already in many cases collaborative. I imagine that this trend will deepen in the coming years. However, there are important tensions and dilemmas, which make group work difficult. In the social and educational field, university career paths are still seen mainly as individual. And to remind us of this, there is the traditional doctoral thesis, understood as a canonical individual exercise to be carried out in order to be admitted into the research *tribe*. This evolution from the

individual to the group is well reflected in my own itinerary. We must not forget that this more individualistic or more collaborative orientation can be strongly influenced by the institutional context and the personality of each individual. In my case, I try not to forget how much I owe to the support I have received from colleagues and friends, past and present, who have made my professional and personal life both easy and enjoyable. Networking favours these dynamics of cooperation, overcoming, at least in part, the difficulties that are sometimes experienced in local professional contexts, where there are greater professional conflicts and where collaboration is sometimes more difficult.

Some of the current challenges we face in the biographical-narrative world include improving the dissemination, knowledge and legitimisation of biographical training and research; deepening the construction of collaborative networks; increasing the international dimension of our activities and improving the capacity to make our work known in languages other than our national language; increasing institutional and social possibilities for obtaining funding for our research activities; improving the possibilities and programmes to offer quality training for people who want to be trained as biographical researchers and/or educators; finally, making more intensive and professional use of information and communication technologies in the biographical-narrative field.

As I conclude my account of these exciting years, what I perceive most strongly is the speed and acceleration of the changes we have experienced in the last three decades. I have the impression that things, in all areas, have moved very fast. This could lead us to reflect on how relative, limited, precarious and finite all our personal and professional ambitions are. And from here we can move on to talk about the necessary generational changes in all areas of human, professional and family life. New generations of teachers and researchers are starting their careers in universities. Young people want to make their way, to show what they are worth, and to contribute to improving society, education and research with new criteria and perspectives that challenge the previous generation. Those of us who have now reached retirement age, and also those of us who have already passed this age, will soon have to step aside, winding up our lectures, projects, publications, conferences, collaborative networks and other activities. For my part, I am trying to prepare myself for this final stage of the end of my career, but, health permitting, at the present time I still have the strength, energy and motivation to continue to contribute to new autobiographical adventures.

None of the above would have been possible without the enthusiastic and continuous collaboration of so many intelligent, generous and committed colleagues, with whom I have had the good fortune to bump into on life's journey. Therefore, the natural conclusion to this text must be a fraternal thank you for all the support I have received.

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