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## Narrating Cases: a Storytelling Approach to Case Study Analysis in the Field of Lifelong Learning Policies

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# Narrating Cases: a Storytelling Approach to Case Study Analysis in the Field of Lifelong Learning Policies

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*Abstract:* The paper aims to discuss the narrative approach to case study analysis, drawing on the research carried out within the H2020 European Project YOUNG\_ADULLLT. It aimed to analyse Lifelong Learning (LLL) policies targeted to young adults in Europe, particularly those in situations of social exclusion, focusing on the different ways in which the policies are socially embedded in specific local contexts across Europe. By a multimethod and multilevel perspective, the research sought to explore the interplay between structural, institutional and individual levels to understand the relationship and complementarity between the LLL policies and the young people's social conditions, needs and expectations. The paper focuses on the narrative approach, namely the "storytelling strategy", adopted to examine the Lifelong Learning policies chosen as case studies in their social, political and economic realities. Different examples of storytelling and their contribution to analyse LLL policies are explored. Lastly, we critically discuss whether the narrative approach allowed to build a dense portrait able to yield the complexity and the specificity of the cases, reconstructing the story of the meaning of Lifelong Learning in different constellations. Epistemological and methodological considerations on the use of narrative approach in social science are provided, highlighting its opportunities and limits.

*Keywords:* storytelling, case study analysis, Lifelong Learning, life course

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## **Introduction: analyzing Lifelong Learning policies for young adults**

According to the key policy priorities of Europe 2020 on employment, poverty reduction, education, sustainability and innovation (European Commission, 2013), current Lifelong Learning (LLL) policies for young adults in Europe aim at creating economic growth and, at the same time, guaranteeing social inclusion (European Commission, 2010), toward the building of inclusive, innovative and reflective societies (European Commission, 2018). However, the different orientations and objectives of LLL policies may produce or intensify conflicts and ambiguities thus causing fragmentation, ineffectiveness and/or unintended effects for young people. This article deals with these issues, drawing on the research carried out within the project “YOUNG\_ADULLLT - Policies Supporting Young Adults in their Life Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe”<sup>1</sup>, funded by the “European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation” program.

Spread over a three-year period (2016-2019), the project has aimed to analyse Lifelong Learning policies targeted to young adults in Europe, particularly for those in situations of social exclusion, focusing on the different ways in which the LLL policies are embedded in specific regional and local contexts across Europe. It has involved nine EU-member countries with different welfare and socio-political assets (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom). Its dual aims have been providing a systematic overview on the highly heterogeneous policies across the countries and yielding new knowledge on the specific local/regional forms of embedding LLL policies in the regional economy, the labour market, the education/training systems and the individual life projects of young adults (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2018).

Through a multimethod and multilevel perspective, the project focused on the interplay of three different analytical levels: i) at the institutional level, it focused on the patterns of cooperation and/or conflict among the key actors of the LLL systems at the national and regional level in order to assess how different degrees of embeddedness within the local labour markets influence the effectiveness of the policies; ii) at the structural level, the project focused on the cross-analysis of the different points of view of the actors involved in the process of policy-making, implementations and realization, in order to depict different combinations of needs, bias and individual perceptions regarding the objectives and the actual helpfulness of the

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<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 693167 (YOUNG\_ADULLLT). For further information, see: <http://www.young-adulllt.eu/index.php>.

policies; iii) at the individual level, the project aimed at analysing to what extent the LLL policies actually support the young adults in their life-planning and choice-making, enabling them to create subjective meaning and continuity along their life courses. Thus, the analysis of the interplay among the institutional, structural and individual levels aimed to understand the relationship between the LLL policies and young people's social conditions, also assessing their potential implications and intended/unintended effects on young adults' life courses (Weiler et al., 2017).

The aforesaid dimensions have been approached from three main theoretical perspectives: Cultural Political Economy (CPE), Governance (GOV) and Life Course Research (LCR). The CPE perspective has helped to reflect on the influence of economic reasoning, and culturally and socially constructed discursive meanings in policy-making. About this latter point, it is noteworthy that these discourses also shape the expectations of policy-makers concerning how the beneficiaries are supposed to react to the policies which address them. It has highlighted the importance of the cultural dimension in interpreting and explaining the complexity of social formations such as policies (Jessop, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013), pointing to the fact that they always reflect selective interpretations of problems, explanations of their cause and preferred solutions. The GOV perspective has led to shifting the approach in the political field from an actor-centred point of view to an institution-centred one, focusing on the analysis of the interplay among the various stakeholders, sectors and levels involved in non-hierarchical and network-like structures (Ball & Junemann, 2012). Specifically, the YOUNG\_ADULLLT project concentrated on three core dimensions of this research strand: a multi-level system, actors and actor constellations, and modes of governance. Lastly, the LCR perspective provides a framework to explore the individual and subjective dimensions, the young adults' perceptions and expectations and their capability to manage the different phases, domains, and spheres of their life courses. On this point, the project investigated relevant social developments such as life course de-standardisation processes (Shanahan et al., 2016), as well as transitions and individual choices as instrumental dimensions in making sense of young adults' life courses and describing and assessing life trajectories in their relationship with the broader contexts in which they progress.

From a methodological point of view, the comparative research carried out within the YOUNG\_ADULLLT project brings together a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods and modes of analysis (primary and secondary): quantitative and qualitative research with young adults, employers and trainers/providers of education/training; cross-national comparisons of macro socio-economic data on the labour market and education/training; and in-depth case-study analyses of selected regions and LLL topics.

Specifically, this article focuses on the narrative approach, namely the ‘storytelling strategy’, adopted to examine the LLL policies/measures chosen as case studies in their social, political and economic realities. Firstly, it briefly discusses the use of narrative approaches to policy analysis (Bansel, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2018a; 2018b), contextualizing it within the broader “narrative turn” that has been of interest in Human and Social Sciences in recent decades, particularly the turn to interpretive approaches to policy analysis (Fischer, 2003; Fischer et al., 2007). Secondly, the rationale of the process of case construction is presented (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Byrne & Ragin, 2013; Yin, 1989). The cases were culturally built by relating their socio-economic dimension (e.g. different structures of the labour market and economy, social inequality and demography); the institutional dimension (e.g. the welfare state and the educational system); the cultural dimension of varying context-dependent understandings of age, labour, family; the individual dimension, namely the subjective perspectives of young people, their aspirations and experiences as well as the transitions in their life courses (Parreira do Amaral & Walther, 2016). Thirdly, it discusses the different narrative strategies chosen to “tell the story of the cases” (van Hulst, 2012; Polletta et al., 2011; McBeth et al., 2005), in order to grasp the complex intertwinement of the different levels, dimensions and perspectives that account for case construction. Specifically, the article presents two examples of storytelling related to the LLL policies chosen as case studies in Germany and Scotland, and examines their contribution to analysing the policies.

Lastly, the paper critically discusses whether the narrative approach made it possible to build a dense portrait that could yield the complexity and specificity of the cases, reconstructing the story of the meaning of Lifelong Learning in different constellations resulting from the interactions among policy-makers (at different levels), representatives of providing organisations (managers and professionals) and young people. The epistemological and methodological considerations on the use of the narrative approach in Social Sciences highlight its opportunities and limits.

### **Narrative approaches and policy analysis**

In the Human and Social Sciences, the use of narrative approaches as an instrument of analysis has acquired a growing interest among scholars in recent decades. Dating variably from the mid-twentieth century to the 1980s, a ‘narrative turn’ has been taken in a number of different fields (such as Health Social Sciences, Psychology, Policy Analysis, Education and Law), forcing “the social sciences to develop new theories, new methods and new ways of talking about self and society” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. xi). This change resonates with the more general process of ‘emancipation’ of Social

Sciences from neo-positivist paradigms, in favour of research methodologies abler to understand - and then yield - social phenomena starting from the very standpoint and “voice” of the actors involved in the research. Despite this growing interest, there is as yet no single approach as to how narrative research in Human and Social Sciences should be deployed (Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015) and the definition of ‘narrative’ itself is in dispute (Riessman, 2008; Andrews et al., 2013). Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined as “discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it” (Hinchman & Hinchman 1997, p. xvi, cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 5). Quoting Throgmorton (2007, p. 250), “it is not merely the individual stories that count, but storytelling and the complex social networks, physical settings, and institutional processes in which those stories are told”. Put differently, actors cannot solve a problem unless they have some understanding (clarity is not necessary) of what the problem is. This is where storytelling comes in (van Hulst, 2012). The argument is that sense-making takes the form of storytelling because actors in social life understand their lives in the form of stories. In other words, issues actors deal with in practice become meaningful because of their placement in a story (Riessman, 2008), so that narrative may be understood as “part of the general process of representation which takes place in human discourse” (Cobley, 2014, p. 3). As Schön (1993) wrote, “each story conveys a very different view of reality and represents a special way of seeing. From a situation that is vague, ambiguous and indeterminate (or rich and complex, depending on one’s frame of mind), each story selects and names different features and relations which become the ‘things’ of the story - what the story is about”.

Whilst recognizing that there are multiple, competing accounts of what narrative might be or mean, in this article we will focus on narrative as an approach to policy and its analysis (Bansel, 2015; Shanahan et al., 2018a; 2018b; see also the special issue of *Policy Studies Journal*, 2018), adopting a sociological approach to storytelling (Polletta et al., 2011). In the early 1990s, narrative made its way into Policy Studies (Peterson, 2018): first, it came into interpretive and critical policy studies, then into policy analysis (e.g., Roe, 1994) and policy process studies (e.g., Stone, 1989), lastly into the so called “policy narratives”, with the development of the narrative policy framework (NPF) approach (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2018a).

Some key theoretical and methodological aspects underlying the use of storytelling and narrative approaches to policy analysis prove the increasing acceptance of many policy analysts of non-positivistic approaches and the consequent turn to interpretive approaches to policy analysis (Fischer, 2003; Fischer et al., 2007). This turn rejects a positivistic view of reality, i.e. reality as something fixed and static that could be simply ‘captured’ by researchers



who wish to understand it. From a post-positivistic perspective, reality is mediated by culture, language and ideas and must be seen as the result of social processes in which people construct their identities, define the values and beliefs they have and make sense of their own world (cfr. Palumbo et al., 2019). While empiricists have sought to restrict the focus on meaning to the observable dimensions of social reality, the interpretive orientation requires the social scientist to pursue the unobservable as well, moving toward an interpretive reconstruction of the situational logic of social action (Fischer, 2003). Thus, the social meanings uncovered by the interpretive analysis are typically embedded in a 'policy narrative', designed to portray the fuller picture of a policy problem and the potential solutions. Built around interpretations, the narrative represents the policy situation, and offers a view of what has to be done and what the expected consequences will be (*ibidem*).

The first element underlying the use of storytelling as an approach for policy analysis is the need for a multi-level analysis that grasps the complex, multidimensional realities of policy processes. This aim is pursued by spanning the three interactive macro, meso and micro levels (Shanahan et al., 2018a; 2018b). The micro level seeks to discern how individuals construct, understand and are influenced by policy narratives. The analysis focuses on how individuals inform, and are informed by them, that is, how narratives affect individual preferences, cognition and decision making. The meso level seeks to understand coalitional and interest group policy narratives. The analysis scales up to policy actors in the policy subsystem, which could be distinct institutionalized groups, charismatic individuals, coalitions, or 'constellations of actors' (Shanahan et al., 2018a) in order to understand how they construct and communicate narratives to influence the policy process and achieve policy outcomes. The macro level seeks to understand institutional and cultural policy narratives, i.e. those that permeate institutions, society and cultural norms. The analysis focuses on the role of cultural narratives in the long-term generation of social mores (Jones & McBeth, 2010), inquiring how changes or stability in macro policy narratives - embedded in cultures and institutions - influence public policy.

Two further key points on the most recent approaches to policy analysis through the use of storytelling confirm the turn to interpretive approaches to policy analysis. Firstly, these approaches accept the social construction of reality as a guiding assumption (Shanahan et al., 2018a), approving that the important part of reality is not so much what is, but rather what people believe something means, at least for the study of politics and policy. Thus, the focus is on the social constructions people use to interpret and define the world (Jones, 2018), since the meaningful parts of policy reality are socially constructed. Secondly, the bounded relativity assumption is adopted: the meaning of social constructions varies to create different policy realities, but

this variation is bounded (e.g., by belief systems, ideologies etc.) and thus is not random but, rather, has some stability over time. In other words, given a context, there are limits to the kinds of interpretations people will make and as they strive to impose order on their understanding of the world, they will have, find, or create systematized ways for interpreting. Those systems create boundaries that bracket possible interpretations (Jones, 2018).

According to these assumptions, the context acquires a key role in the interpretation of (social-political) phenomena and realities. In a policy narrative, the 'setting' is the 'space' (in spatial and temporal terms) where the action of the story takes place over time. It can be defined as specific policy contexts like "legal and constitutional parameters, geography, evidence, economic conditions, norms, or other features" that are consequential in the policy area (Shanahan et al., 2018a, p. 176). Thus, it refers to the broader social-economic-geographic-political context. Settings are important to policy narratives since they may contribute to the extent to which a narrative is perceived as congruent to the audience. Policy narratives that are more congruent with the audience's life experiences and understandings of the world tend to be more persuasive. Public policy is inherently and inextricably linked to real times and places, and a policy narrative can be more convincing with real-world settings.

Framing is a useful interpretative lens to examine policy narratives, according to the frame analysis, which was first introduced in sociological and psychological studies by Goffman (1974) and linguistic and cognitive research notably by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In the sociological tradition, issue framing tends to refer to the social construction of problems, to the process by which people construct interpretations of problematic situations, making them coherent from their previous perspective and providing themselves with evaluative frameworks within which they can judge how to act. Quoting Schön and Rein (1994, p. 23) frames are "structures of belief, perception, and appreciation that underlie policy positions"; they can be broadly understood as how people talk about policy issues, the terms they use to describe problems, the aspects of issues that they highlight or downplay. The concept of frames is an alternative to the positivist policy analysis based on the rational model of policy making (Miedziński, 2018) and it characterizes the interpretative approaches to policy analysis that departed from the traditional understanding of policy as (rational) instruments for problem solving in a linear or cyclical manner. Indeed, framing leads to different views of the world and creates multiple social realities. Interest groups and policy constituencies, scholars working in different disciplines, and individuals in different contexts of everyday life have different frames that lead them to see different things, make different interpretations of the way things are and support different courses of action concerning what shall be done, how



and by whom. Because the reality of any policy situation is always richer and more complex than can be grasped through any particular story, policy controversies are inherently subject to multi-perspectival accounts (Rein & Schön, 1991, pp. 264-265). The importance of framing in policy narratives is well established: as Stone (1989) observed, frames highlighting causal attributions move particular policy solutions forward by indicating who (if anyone) should be punished or empowered to 'fix' problems. The focus is on the causal assumption in policy narratives, i.e. explicit and implicit assumptions on causal relations and systemic dependencies in the narratives, which could be seen as depicting the theory of change underlying the storylines. The emphasis on causal inferences in narratives relates to the 'situated causal inquiry' of Argyris and Schön (1996) used to map and verify the cause-effect assumptions in theories of change used by social actors. The analysis may reveal logical inconsistencies and leaps or vague statements on causal relations. On this point, scholars emphasize the central role of 'plot', that it is the narrative element that "link[s] the characters to settings, assign[s] the roles of the characters, and, most importantly, assign[s] blame through some assertion of causation" (Shanahan et al., 2011, p. 540). Thus, it is more than a sequence of events; it is the recognition of a policy problem and, usually, it reveals the 'moral of the story', which is typically the policy solution in the policy narrative frequently culminating in a call to action. Hajer (1993, p. 47) argues that "story lines are the medium through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements".

Thanks to its multi-level analysis and the aforesaid underlying assumptions, the narrative approaches to policy analysis are concerned with the multiple ways in which people (officials, politicians and their addressees) make sense of the world and apply 'policy' to it, discovering underlying meanings (Fischer, 2003) and how the values and interests of different actors relate and are socially constructed or modified during the concrete making of policies in their contexts. In the wake of the epistemological and methodological insights elaborated in this branch of policy analysis, we will present a narrative approach to the construction and analysis of case studies built around Lifelong Learning policies. Indeed, it adequately fits the aim of addressing the patterns of policy-making and the effects of policies by relating the different point of view of the actors involved at different levels.

### **A narrative approach to case study analysis**

In this paragraph we discuss how a narrative approach to case study analysis has been applied in the framework of the Horizon 2020 research project "YOUNG\_ADULLLT. Policies Supporting Young Adults in their Life

Course. A Comparative Perspective of Lifelong Learning and Inclusion in Education and Work in Europe”. The main aim of the project is to explore how and with what consequences the LLL policies targeting young adults across Europe affect their addressees’ life courses. In pursuing this goal, particular attention has been assigned to the contradictions among the policy objectives in order to bring out potential unintended effects. Given the manifold nature of the Lifelong Learning policy scope itself, as well as the multi-level and multi-method design of the research provided by the project, a narrative approach to the case study analysis in YOUNG\_ADULLLT has been implemented.

Before discussing the presentation of this narrative approach to case analysis, it is important to explore the approach implemented for case selection or, rather, construction. Indeed, each project partner was requested to select two case studies among the LLL policies identified as particularly relevant in their regional context through a mapping action which, in the preliminary stage of the research process, was devoted to finding the most important policies in terms of the labour market, education and youth and social issues, assuming that the LLL domain derives from the intersection of these policy fields. Moreover, since one of the main aims of the project was to analyse different policy-making networks involved in designing and delivering LLL policies for young adults at the regional and local level, the understanding of “case study” did not coincide with mere policies to be analysed, rather it provided that each case study was intended as “a policy working in its context”. In this way, a more dynamic approach to the case study analysis has been applied in the project, overcoming a positivist view of case studies as “something already existing in nature” and promoting the cultural construction of cases, which better fits the aims of this research. The sharing of a strong orientation toward understanding social phenomena as dynamic and constantly variable in relation to the changes occurring in their contexts led the project partners to converge on a socio-cultural approach to case studies consistently with the proposal by Bartlet and Vavrus (2017). In the wake of what we could define as a constructivist approach to case studies, in YOUNG\_ADULLLT the case studies were addressed as “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1989, p. 23). Indeed, this perspective has proven particularly well suited to building cases, like the ones of the project, characterised by a blurred distinction between the policy and its context (because “objects” are far from “reality”, which changes the definition of the context) and “enlivened” by the interactions of multiple stakeholders with highly variable levels of power. Moreover, in terms of the core analysis, the project was meant to identify patterns of policy making and explore how they work,

rather than assess the impacts of the policies. Therefore, looking at linear deterministic causation in understanding the cases, as if data “existed” beyond the relationship between the researcher and the “object” of research would have led to disregarding the very nature of the cases. On the contrary, by recognising a dynamic complexity in the cases, we have paid closer attention to the relations among different dimensions (from macro to micro), as well as between different actors. Furthermore, we have facilitated a comparative analysis able to assume the strong structural heterogeneity of the countries involved - specimens in this sense are the profound differences among the welfare (Esping-Andresen, 1990) and transition (Walther, 2006) regimes of the partner countries -. This approach has allowed us to take into consideration the different levels (from transnational to local) at which the discourses surrounding and shaping LLL policy making interact, as well as the interplay of different governance patterns involved in the implementation. Furthermore, the cultural construction of dynamic case studies has paved the way for resonating and relating the different points of view of the actors involved in their development (from policy managers to street level professionals and addressees). Thus, through a methodological perspective, the case studies in YOUNG\_ADULLLT performed the function of “knitting together” the empirical materials gathered “around” the LLL policies analysed in the previous stages of the project. The policy mapping, policy document and grey literature analysis, the quantitative analysis of data concerning the structural features of participating countries and the living conditions of young adults in the regional context, the reconstruction of the dynamics characterising the local skill ecologies<sup>2</sup>, the qualitative information gathered through semi-structured interviews with professionals participating in LLL fields and biographical interviews with young adults who accessed the policies were thus further connected and explored by the case study construction (Byrne & Ragin, 2013).

Once the case studies were built, they were analysed with a consideration for the different levels at which LLL policies are negotiated. They show the interaction among macro-structures, regional environments, institutions/organisations and individual expectations (see Parreira do Amaral & Walther, 2016). This has created a further element of complexity, both in terms of analysis and results. In order to hold a grasp of the interplay among levels, actors and dimensions, a storytelling approach to case analysis was adopted. Specifically, after a contextual introduction focused on a selection of the structural features of the local context which particularly affect the choic-

<sup>2</sup> The notion of “skill ecology” refers to the features of the local systems of match between the supply of skills from the education and training sector and the demand for skills from the labour market. For more detailed information, see also: [http://www.young-adulllt.eu/glossary/listview.php?we\\_objectID=213](http://www.young-adulllt.eu/glossary/listview.php?we_objectID=213).

es of young adults (e.g. labour market structure, educational opportunities, general living conditions), each partner was requested to construct a narrative that would clearly highlight what elements made the case “unique” as an LLL policy targeted to young people and interacting with their life courses in a specific context. In a narrative perspective, the policies were interpreted as the “crossroads” of the different biographical and/or institutional “stories”, the starting point from which to develop accounts focused on the relation with the context. Here we can find a connection with the epistemological understanding of sociology elaborated by Charles Wright Mills (1959), who conceived the intersection between history and individual biographies (1957) as the core of such discipline. Thus, the main “plot” of these narratives relates to the embeddedness of the cases, focusing for instance on the discourses underlying the policy design, the networks of implementation or the structural features of the contexts. Moreover, in order to represent the manifold standpoints of the stakeholders participating, these plots were further animated by the “Greek chorus” of the voices of the actors involved. Nevertheless, since the heterogeneity of the storylines built on the case could have potentially hindered their comparability, a common structure for the plots was shared among the YOUNG\_ADULLLT partners, who agreed upon the use of one “entry point” per narrative, selected between the “evolution of the policy entry point” and “biographical entry point”. The former was meant to focus especially on the way policy developed in terms of main objectives, target groups and governance patterns in order to explore the effects of the policy in its context according to the views of the stakeholders interviewed. The latter focused on selected addressees’ biographies to represent different interactions of the policy with different target profiles, particularly questioning how participating in the policy affected the addressees’ biographies.

The following provides the narratives of two case studies that were analysed: the VbFF (“Verein zur beruflichen Förderung von Frauen”) in the German region of Rhein-Main and the DYW (“Developing Youth Workforce”) in the Scottish Glasgow City Region. These examples were selected on the basis of their effectiveness in showing how the two entry points - biographical (VbFF) and evolution of the policy (DYW) - worked differently in yielding narratives able to represent the complexity of the cases.

### **The VbFF case short introduction**

The case of VbFF in the Rhein-Main region was labelled as “the functionality of feminist empowerment for active labour market policies”. It is a measure of part-time vocational training targeted to young mothers and provided by the Verein zur beruflichen Förderung von Frauen (“Association for the Professional Promotion of Women”), a well-established feminist as-

sociation operating since the late Seventies in the field of women's empowerment. Specifically, the measure targets mothers up to the age of 25 living in Frankfurt with a school leaving qualification. It offers thirty-hours per week part-time vocational training. Its main aim is to make apprenticeship paths sustainable for young women who would not, otherwise, be able to complete them due to the difficult conciliation of childcare duties and the time commitment required by the "traditional" German dual training system. The apprenticeships managed by VbFF unfold in collaborating companies, vocational schools and the association itself. The measure has been implemented and funded as of 1998 by the local Jobcentre. As will be shown in the following detailed analysis of this case narrative, the label applied to introduce it refers to the particular positioning of the association, which resonates with the ambivalent effects of the measure in terms of holistic empowerment and support of employability. Indeed, assuming that the VbFF "takes an intermediate position between young women and vocational schools and especially companies, but also between the feminist women's movement, the economy and the welfare state with its different sectors of social, education and labour market policy which in turn position themselves differently between individuals and the market" (Verlage et al., 2018, p. 16), it is interesting to observe how the service could potentially fit both the feminist aim of supporting women's emancipation and self-determination, and the neo-liberal ideal of a self-organising and self-regulating work force. Therefore, by this case storytelling of different potential understandings of the very meaning of "Lifelong Learning" are brought to light and discussed thanks to the references to the changes in the governance patterns as well as in the cultural definition of the goals throughout the VbFF story.

### **VbFF case storytelling**

The storytelling of the VbFF case starts by following the life trajectory of Linda, a 28-year-old single mother who completed her school degree, then moved to Germany from Africa, where she had belonged to an upper-middle class background. Her profile is particularly relevant for her being torn between the will to increase her personal growth and the necessity to access an apprenticeship in order to widen her opportunities in the local labour market. Indeed, immediately after her arrival in Germany she worked as an au pair, enrolled in a few language courses and got married, but the discord with her husband concerning her pregnancy (he did not want to continue it) led them to divorce. Once she became a single parent, a colleague at the hotel where she was working as a "handyman" told her of the opportunity to do a part-time vocational training path at VbFF. Here the storytelling questions her choice to enrol in the policy, exploring the reasons why she selected

an independent service provider instead of a “classical” apprenticeship in the German dual-system. This is a narrative choice to introduce and discuss some of the shortcomings of the German public training system, especially in terms of the gender segmentation of the vocational sectors (which tend to privilege male workers) and in relation to the high requirements in terms of weekly commitment for the apprentices (2-3 days per week at school and the remaining time at work for 3 years), with a very low level of coordination between the apprenticeships’ time schedule and the childcare facilities’ timetable. Hence, the narrative focuses on the particular intersection of structural inequalities weighing on young single mothers without apprenticeships in the German context, which makes them one of the most disadvantaged groups in that society. Following Linda’s choice, the storytelling then introduces the function of VbFF in terms of support of the apprenticeships, as it works in an intermediate position between apprentices and companies aiming at synchronizing their different needs. Furthermore, this gives an opportunity to stress the relevant subsidiary role of independent service providers in the context of the region, which is relevant information for relating the case to the features of its local skill ecology. Subsequently, the narrative turns back to Linda’s trajectory by quoting a recurrent statement from her interview: “I want to make something of myself”, which is interpreted as a subjective translation of the “typical” Lifelong Learning ethos of permanent self-adaptation to market needs. Also, the storytelling is able to move on a different level of discursive reproduction, mentioning the pervasive discourse at the German national level concerning the shortage of skilled workers. In the Rhein-Main region, this gets further resonance thanks to the “Overall strategy for securing skilled personnel in Hesse” initiative, a joint approach of the Ministry of the Economy and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration aimed at fostering the activation of the unexploited labour force.

In order to allow the reader to look at the VbFF position through another perspective, the narrative then arrives to Linda’s decision to enrol in the programme. Yet, when she asks to access it, she finds that she does not fit the access criteria (namely living within the Frankfurt metropolitan area and being registered at the local Jobcenter). Consequently, she looks for a new flat in the area, and quits her transitional job at the hotel, but since she does this outside the supervision of the local Jobcenter, she initially faces a 30% reduction in benefits. She is, however, able to negotiate a revision of this penalty, which she obtains within 3 months. The narration of this process functions to stress the absence of intermediation by the VbFF when Linda negotiates her position with the Jobcenter. This point is presented as a potential consequence of a shift in perspective for the VbFF: from the feminist tradition of women’s empowerment to a new approach to support conditioned by



the funding mechanism steered by the Jobcenter. In other words, “Linda’s odyssey through the Jobcenter can be interpreted in terms of incompatible rationalities in the overlapping sectors of labour market policy and lifelong learning policy. Here we see that it is not only the measures/policy itself, which is difficult to be assigned to a single policy sector (cf. Bittlingmayer et al., 2017), even the rationalities of policies (here Jobcenter and VbFF) need not to be congruent” (Verlage et al., 2018, p. 21). Moreover, as the narrative points out, in Linda’s case finally getting access to the programme seems to be more related to her determination and the strategic use of social and cultural resources (deriving from her middle-class background), rather than the support from VbFF. As a consequence, the analysis questions to what extent the original feminist aim of the association is actually still pursued, especially in regard to the weakest potential target profiles. The exploration of this latter topic is further addressed by the storytelling through the reference to the beneficiaries’ selection process implemented by VbFF. In fact, Linda is able to complete the tests and is accepted as a participant. The VbFF selection criteria are described as perfectly overlapping with those of the companies, thus focusing on aptitude tests, personal interviews, a school leaving qualification and German language skills. This constitutes a narrative opportunity to recall another widespread discourse at the German national level, namely the lack of training maturity of the potential workforce. This maturity is assessed by VbFF through a mix of the skill and competence evaluation and a realistic assessment of the individuals’ capacity to complete apprenticeships while being young mothers, consistently with the apprenticeship completion rate as a formal criterion for refunding the Jobcenter. In reflecting on these issues, the narrative integrates the story of Elena, a single mother from Eastern Europe, whose relation with the VbFF precisely exemplifies the effects of the interaction of those different selection criteria. Elena arrived in Germany as a young single mother without having her studies recognised. After a period of employment as a housekeeper, she started an apprenticeship as an office clerk thanks to VbFF. When Elena accounts for her selection test, she declares her inability to deal with German grammar, which was compensated by a good performance in Maths and Logic. Through this reference, the narrative is able to show a certain degree of flexibility applied by the VbFF in managing the selection which, at least partly, seems to counterweigh the recent “cultural push” towards employability to the detriment of holistic feminist empowerment. Finally, afterward the definitive entrance of both the addressees in the measure, the storytelling integrates different experts’ voices, which are presented to further stress the ambivalence of the effects produced by the measure on its beneficiaries’ biographies. This leads to a more general consideration: “the feminist approach of providing holistic support is functional for the activation regime in ‘producing’ a self-organ-

ised workforce while at the same time the organisation [VbFF] has to adapt to the specific principles and conditions of the Jobcenter according to which autonomy is not an end in itself but only a means for labour market integration. The dominance of the aim employability [...] is here again verified. Furthermore, we showed the mechanism, which translates a former resistant approach into a function of a hegemonic discourse” (Verlage et al., 2018, p. 25).

The VbFF case storytelling is thus a good example of a narrative solution to bring to light the interplay among the discourses reproduced at different levels concerning the very meaning of Lifelong Learning, the governance patterns activated for implementing a Lifelong Learning measure, and the subjective standpoints, needs and expectations of the beneficiaries. It is noteworthy how its narrative manages this interdimensional and multi-level complexity by applying the two biographical trajectories of the addressees as a common thread of its plot, finding an equal balance between the generalisation and the valuation of the micro dimension of subjectivity. Moreover, through the references to both the addressees’ stories, a very spread contradiction among policies targeted to people in vulnerable conditions is stressed. Indeed, both the women have dealt with “creaming effect” of the policy. On the one side, they were required to adapt to minimum access standards which could have further worsen their already fragile social condition. On the other side, they had to compete with more skilled – and probably less disadvantaged - other potential beneficiaries, who would have reasonably promised a higher probability of completing their apprenticeship paths, which the policy managers have to take into consideration in order to get refunded.

### **The DYW case short introduction**

The DYW (Developing Young Workforce) case in the Glasgow City region was labelled as “supporting school-to-work transition by early guidance and apprenticeship”. It is a case of educational and labour market policy set at national level and planned as a 7 years long programme. The policy aims to keep young people (aged 14-24) who leave the school still engaged with the educational and training system, by fostering flexible and tailored educational, training, apprenticeship and work experience paths. The underlying idea is that especially disadvantaged youths threaten to face further social exclusion once they lose the contact with those systems, making their future reintegration potentially harder to achieve. Since the integration in the labour market is assumed as a mid-long term outcome, actions of synchronisation between the delivered educational and training paths and the companies in the local area are provided by the policy. This also positively affects

the dynamics of the local skill ecology, the synchronisation of which is enhanced by a rationalisation of the already working networks of stakeholders supporting and linking the educational paths and the transitions to work in the area. Consequently, particular attention is given to the bond between schools and local companies. Due to its features of national programme designed to be adapted to different local needs and challenges, it is interesting to observe how it is implemented in the specific context of the Glasgow City region, which is characterised by a significant concentration of youths belonging to disadvantaged background and/or in condition of social vulnerability. This case storytelling thus focuses on the permanent tension between the different levels (from national to local) where the policy is designed and implemented, yielding insights concerning the constant adaptation of the governance patterns as well as the negotiations among the actors involved.

### **The DYW case storytelling**

The DYW case in the Glasgow City region was told by starting from the “evolution of the policy” narrative entry point. Consistently, the “main character” of this storytelling is the policy, while the “plot” is constructed around the tension between the overall features of the policy set at national level and the functions and meanings it gets in adapting to the local context of Glasgow. As a consequence, the narrative “moves” top-down throughout its unfolding, applying the same approach to each of its three main sections: correspondences, implementation and originalities.

The issue of correspondence is tackled by this storytelling by questioning the coherence and divergence among the different meanings attached to the policy at different levels (from national to local) and by different actors (from policy managers to street level professionals and addresses). The story then starts with the reconstruction of the main target of the DYW programme as set by national policy makers. Through the words of a manager we can thus identify as its “ideal” target the high school graduated youths who are not willing to enrol university. The underlying idea is that this particular target would significantly improve its employability chances if it received further vocational training before entering the labour market. Consequently, the main action provided is the promotion of flexible vocational routes centred on apprenticeship and work experiences. As particularly stressed by the quoted manager, an early proposal of these vocational opportunities is considered pivotal. Therefore, they are meant to be fostered when the targeted youths are still attending their educational paths, in order to start familiarising them with other educational and training contexts. Here the storytelling integrates a reference to the prevalent expectations shared by policy makers, teachers – and probably more generally by the “adult world” concerning

the “right” destinations for the youths’ life courses in the Scottish society. In fact, by analysing the general aim of DYW, the narrative introduces an element of normativity which perfectly resonates with the neoliberal understanding of the meanings and functions of education: “the intention [of the DYW programme] is not to normalise the educational pathways and ways to get into the labour market, but standardise the outputs of the process: education and employment, which in the Scottish policy sphere is labelled as ‘positive destinations’” (Capsada-Musech, 2018, p. 19). Afterwards the storytelling moves to the context of Glasgow, illustrating the actions devoted to strengthen the connection between companies and schools. These actions provide the entrance of representatives of diverse employers of the region in the schools. The aim is to deliver information sessions concerning the work opportunities and the actual work life in those companies. Yet, through the addressees’ voice, these actions are represented in the narrative as not very effective. Indeed, all the interviewed youths have recognised the potential utility of DYW after they had already left school. This is a relevant “turning point” for the case storyline, since an issue related to its contextualisation it is here brought to light for the first time. Actually, the interviewed youths have very de-standardised educational and professional paths, characterised by early school leaving and an irregular relation with temporary employments, in addition to a number of diverse forms of social vulnerabilities. The fact that none of them was able to exploit the opportunities proposed by DYW when he/she was still engaged with school is thus narrated as a proof of the, at least partial, inadequacy of the measure for a context, like the one of Glasgow, where the concentration of disadvantaged youths is particularly high. In other words, “there is a clear educational pathway for those that want to follow the academic path, another one [namely the DYW] for those that do not fit into the academic route but ‘behave properly and are proactive’, but there is no clear alternative to support those that are not in any of the previous” (Capsada-Musech, 2018, p. 20). In discussing this issue, the narrative goes further in terms of critical reading, stressing the point that all the interviewed addressees have been engaged by DYW thanks to the more or less direct mediation of persons belonging to their personal networks (especially parents). This leads to further question the capacity of educational and work institutions representatives to effectively support a particular target that, consequently, would probably better respond to preliminary and more holistic actions centred on self-esteem and mutual trust construction, instead of employability-oriented measures.

The storytelling then focuses on the implementation dimension, giving particular attention to the intended effects of the DYW programme design in terms of enhancement and rationalisation of the networks of stakeholder in the Lifelong Learning field. Moreover, by integrating diverse experts’

standpoint and the policy document analysis, the specific intention of promoting new synergies between the public and private domains is stressed: “the DYW policy aims for a cultural shift, in which employers do not see themselves as simple customers of the education system, but as co-investors and co-designers” (Capsada-Musech, 2018, p. 22). Once it comes “down” to the contextualisation in the Glasgow area, the narrative recalls this latter aim by reporting different examples of how DYW has actually improved already existing networks of private and public actors, which has constituted a factor of strength. Nevertheless, the relation with the context is again represented as complex due to the particular social conditions of a significant share of the DYW potential target group. This paves the way for introducing the section about originalities, where the overall underlying assumption of DYW – “in order to be successful and contribute to society it is fundamental to be employed” – is critically related to the actual needs of the interviewed addresses. The necessity to further reflect on “tools” and actions specifically designed for the more disadvantaged youths is thus pointed out by the storytelling, which applies this topic as a “litmus paper” by means of which to assess the general adaptability of the programme: “although DYW leaves enough flexibility to the regions to identify the local/regional needs to better adapt the policy to them, there is no further support on how to do it and the regional and local actors are left themselves to deal with these needs, regardless how challenging they are” (Capsada-Musech, 2018, p. 26).

When it comes to its conclusion, the DYW storytelling returns on a tension which, more or less explicitly, crosses the whole of its plot: the contrast between the focus on employability (here understood as a direct and positive “consequence” of adequate educational and training paths) and the need for holistic support of disadvantaged target groups. Firstly, this topic is further addressed by comparing different meanings attached to education and training by experts at different levels. Indeed, among the interviewed professional at higher levels seem to prevail a conception of the educational and training paths affected by the rational choice perspective. According to their view, indeed, the provision of the right information to youths should lead them to make the best choices for their trajectories. However, the street level professionals contrast this idea by stressing the relevance of a broader set of life spheres (thus exceeding the educational and professional ones) in the shaping of disadvantaged youths’ life courses, claiming for programmes able to take them into consideration. Secondly, by a governance perspective the tension between employability and holistic support is narrated by referring to the partial contradiction between the need to respond to the performance requested at national level in terms of outcomes (see the “positive destinations” cited above), and the need at Glasgow local level for integrative actions target to the weakest participants’ profiles.

Thus, this approach to storytelling was able to show how crucial a wide leeway for flexibility in adapting a national policy to a local context could be, especially when local actors are willing to interact (which also produces effects on the strengthening of already existing networks). At the same time, this narrative has brought to light how the strong orientation towards employability reproduced by policy managers at national level entails forms of standardisation which hardly fit the needs of the weakest profiles of potential beneficiaries (as pointed out by diverse voices of the interviewed street level professionals).

### Final remarks

This article has discussed how storytelling as policy analysis can help us advance from case to knowledge, for instance, by overcoming a one-sided perspective of policy-making to include addressees' standpoints in understanding policy-making while accounting for the complexity that characterises policy-making on the ground (cf. Palumbo et al., 2019).

On this point, Fischer (2012, pp. 134-135) argues that, "beyond seeking to explain a 'given reality', social science must attempt to explain how social groups construct their own understandings of that reality". This reflects Rapleye's (2015) description of globalization as "a multiplicity of 'mini-projects' involving pluralities of actors who assign different meanings to similar events, given different positionalities, projects and structural limitations rooted in divergent histories, contexts and conceptual/discursive schemes" (p. 82). This idea is also consistent with the evaluation literature, that stresses the importance of the knowledge of the functioning of specific "mechanisms" in specific contexts (see Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Astbury & Leeuw, 2010) and the relevance of the reconstruction of micro-causality processes to understand the real functioning of policies (Virtanen & Uusikylä, 2004).

Therefore, the use of storytelling as a tool for policy analysis aims to overcome a rather common constraint in the extant literature. Indeed, in this domain there is a quite widespread use of narratives focused on the policy problem, which tends to reproduce the perspective and the conceptual frames of policy makers or, more generally, of the people who design or implement policies, leaving little or no room for addressees' viewpoints (see Polletta et al., 2011). This tendency emerges especially in situations in which different kinds of narratives are produced by different actors in a potentially conflicting scenario with different interest groups (e.g. McBeth et al., 2005) and it is quite common in conditions of unbalanced power between countries (Roe, 1994) or between addressees and implementers. At the same time, it is noteworthy that storytelling has been widely considered as a fruitful tool for policy design and planning (van Hulst, 2012), but also as a way



to deliver care in unbalanced relationship situations, such as in the health care sector (Banks-Wallace, 1999). In addition, storytelling is a main tool for giving room to addressees' voices before and after the crossroads between their trajectories and policies (and vice versa, because policies are sometimes changed by the addressees' reactions, but designers and policy makers are not necessarily aware of this). Thus, the applied approach to case studies has allowed each of the main actors to "tell his/her story", and the narrative strategy used to put the different perspectives into relation provided two main "entry points" for case storytelling: the evolution of the policy in its context and the life stories of addressees meeting the policy. In this way, for instance, the modification of policies from national to local level were observed from the decision makers' standpoint, or that of the 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980). At the same time, the more "biographical" entry point has allowed to deepen the relations between the participants' biographies, the policies and their context, exploring the meaning subjectively attached to Lifelong Learning policies (cf. Palumbo et al., 2019).

Concerning the case studies presented in this essay, the storytelling approach adopted to "tell the story of the cases" was particularly helpful in discovering some of the main discourses on Lifelong Learning (Vargas, 2017). The first is the discourse of the knowledge economy or knowledge society, according to which the role of education is interpreted in market terms. Inspired by the human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1962), it is based on the assumption that continuous learning is essential for the changing demands of the global economy and for forming the necessary human capital, knowledge and skills. As a result, most of the education systems around the world have changed the academic subjects taught as well as teaching methods so as to serve the interests of the economy. They often narrow the curriculum to disciplines that are thought to produce better employment prospects. The emphasis on 21st century skills, transferrable and soft skills, the multidimensional concept of 'competence' (Fondazione Agnelli, 2018) acquiring a key role within compulsory and adult education, as well as work-based learning are illustrative of this point. According to this discourse, youth unemployment becomes a problem of lack of qualifications and skills, while LLL is conceived as an instrument to tackle the problem of skills mismatch and outdated knowledge, to provide the right set of skills for work. In other terms, it is an instrument for adaptability to the labour market and a response to unemployment. LLL policies that are inspired by these discourses, however, risk failing to respond to specific local/regional challenges or actual young adults' needs, since their subjective/biographical expectations are often inadequately taken into account. Especially in the cases, unfortunately widespread, where unemployment is mainly due to the lack of job demand by the economic and institutional system, and

to the uncoordinated functioning of the educational system and the labour market. Confirming this, the analysis of the 183 Lifelong Learning policies reviewed in the 9 Countries participating in the YOUNG\_ADULLLT project shows the alignment of LLL policies with the dominant, European-wide ‘employability’ discourse, besides taking into account the significant diversity of situations regarding the socioeconomic context (including the profile of the labour market), nature (centralised or decentralised), modes of governance, implementation of Lifelong Learning policies and the match/mismatch between skills supply and demand, not only among the 9 countries analysed, but also – often – between regions in the same country.

These trends are also connected to the consolidation of a dominant discourse highlighting the centrality of individuals and biographical choices over social structures and institutions in explaining opportunities, trajectories and identities in contemporary societies. The focus is on the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their own learning throughout their lives (Vargas, 2017). This has been interpreted as the shift of responsibility from the state (as bearer of the duty to fulfil the right to education) to the market and the individual, who is now “burdened” (Biesta, 2015) with the duty to learn and to do so throughout his/her life. In plain English, if individuals fail, it is regarded as their fault. The individual is understood as a consumer and education as a commodity that can be purchased, sold, or exchanged in the market, and “converted” by young people into employability. This shift has been interpreted as a symptom of the erosion of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism that, according to Milana (2012), affects the role of the state in redistributing wealth through public provision, and privatizes the relationship between the state and its citizens.

This risks reproducing inequalities among the LLL policies’ addressees, reinforcing the inequalities between youths who have relied on a good amount of economic, cultural and social capital and youths with weaker structural conditions. On this point, the narrative strategies could help to investigate to what extent different stakeholders (from the policy makers to the people who implement LLL policies, to the policies’ addressees) internalize the neo-liberal ideology of individual responsibility in the self-management of biographies, often “accounting” the problem of inadequacy of the institutions in engaging youths by reducing it to a matter of individual failure. A frame that can be emphasised by the adoption of the paradigm of activation in designing and implementing policies. Therefore, neoliberalism risks exacerbating inequalities and increasing the precariousness of many peoples’ lives, taking into account the relevant social issues that characterize contemporary society, in that life-courses are increasingly de-standardized (Shanahan et al., 2016) and young people’s educational trajectories increasingly diversified.

Since youth educational transitions are one of the main causes of the reproduction of social inequality (Tarabini & Ingram, 2018; Walther et al., 2016) and, according to the aforesaid discourse, individual choices are conceived as more and more important in explaining modern social positions and inequalities, it is essential to focus on inequalities and the mechanisms of their production, reproduction and potential transformation in different national contexts. This requires taking into account how the systemic inequalities of class, gender, race and ethnicity intersect with other aspects such as geographical disparities and (im)mobility, the unequal rewards of different educational paths as well as institutions, and the specific features (opportunities and constraints) of the local labour markets.

The narrative approach adopted for case study analysis discussed in this essay identifies a research method that aims to be inclusive and representative of people, their perspectives and interests, bringing out the points of view of the three main actors of the policies - namely decision-makers, implementers and addressees (Palumbo, 2001) - while, at the same time, capturing the cultural and policy contexts and socio-economic conditions across countries and establishing “relations between sets of relationships”. In doing so, storytelling allowed us to find meaningful sets of relations without a dramatic simplification of the reality, a price often paid by comparativists. On the contrary, by highlighting connections between sets of relationships the storytelling approach shows that the relationships among the designers’, implementers’ and addressees’ points of view are sometimes divergent, particularly along the biographical entry point. Storytelling allows for the contextualization of the match between addressees and implementers, considering each of them as a ‘hub’ of social, parental, small group, organizational and institutional relations that shape this match of two different worlds and are also shaped by it (cf. Palumbo et al., 2019).

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