



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

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Article first published online

February 2021

HOW TO CITE

Caramiello, L. (2021). The Narrative of the Unemployed. A Story of Formative Growth, Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 13(1), 1-25.

DOI: [10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-1-1](https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-1-1)

The Narrative of the Unemployed. A Story of Formative Growth

Luigi Caramiello

Abstract: This paper develops some fundamental reflections on the essence and possibilities of “training”, with reference to certain types of audience, characterized by marginality and even deviant behaviours. The author recalls the main steps of a training path addressed to adults, through the narration and the analysis of on-the-field experiences, which are examined both at the operational and the hermeneutical level at the same time, by relying on the narrative method as well as on the theoretical analysis. The study sheds light on crucial problems in the field of sociology of cultural processes and interdisciplinary areas that are interrelated with the general dimension of *education*. By focusing on lifelong learning as a tool for identity restructuring, the discussion explores the contradictions but also the great potential of this particular device of social action.

Keywords: lifelong learning, communication, narrative method, identity change

“We social scientists would do well to hold back our eagerness to control that world which we so imperfectly understand. The fact of our imperfect understanding should not be allowed to feed our anxiety and so increase the need to control. Rather our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honoured, motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty.”

Gregory Bateson

Introduction

The idea to write a paper that would reconstruct a phase of my activity as a “trainer” – in particular a sort of “action-research” path with a group of the “movement of the unemployed” – came long after the activity itself had taken place. The first experience dates back to the mid-1990s. The paper was originally written down, almost in one sitting, immediately after the conclusion of my experience, but, for various reasons, it was left in a drawer for a long time.

This work, appropriately re-elaborated, is an attempt to extrapolate – from the “memory” of a particular training path – some crucial matters and issues, which are prominent or still in embryo in the general field of education and training, thus developing some reflections that have matured in more recent years. In short, the paper is the “account” of a real work experience on the field, similar to those carried out by the sociologists of the “Chicago School”, which were aimed at telling the story of formation of real individuals to whom the action of *lifelong learning* is addressed; at the same time, the paper is the narrative of a personal way of living that experience of professional and scientific commitment.

The experience appears to have its own peculiar features and to be still relevant today for three substantial reasons. First of all, it conveys the atmosphere, in certain “working-class” environments, of a crucial phase of the cycle of deindustrialization, which continued to massively affect the metropolitan area of Naples, the background from which a large part of the course takers came. Those were the years following the dismantling of the steel mill in Bagnoli, with the consequent loss of thousands of jobs both at Ilva and at hundreds of small and medium-sized enterprises in satellite activities. In other words, the context reflected the canonical image – consolidated in the collective imagination – of the dismantlement and decline above all of the national, heavy industry, which produced a very strong morphogenesis in the identity, in the social structure, as well as in the vocation of the entire metropolitan area. This is a factor of great importance on consideration that it is impossible to understand human behaviour if its intentions are

not taken into account and it is impossible to understand human intentions if, as Schutz (1962) points out, the context in which they make sense is unknown. Nowadays, of course, the dynamics of productive reconversion and, I would say, anthropological reconversion – which we are currently witnessing, in the midst of the *digital revolution*, with the advent of *share economy*, of industry 4.0, of intelligent technologies, and at the dawn of the *learning machine*, which is pushing entire production sectors towards obsolescence – have radically different connotations. Yet, alongside certain advantages that this rapid change is generating within society, the disorientation, alienation, dissonance, and anomy that this new phase of acceleration in the change of the anthropic, urban, and technological landscape is bringing about – both in historically highly professional sectors (I am only thinking of the complex information or mechatronics sectors), and in typically marginal and precarious segments (I am thinking of the various networks and the real underworld of “distribution”) – could reveal some traits of disorientation and disintegration of identities in the affected social groups that are in many respects similar to those experienced by the old *jobless*, the expelled and “excluded” ones that belonged to previous generations. The fact is, to put it in more appropriate terms, that “with reference to the evolution of the geopolitical scenarios and of the evolution or involution of the traditional twentieth-century models, it is time to ask ourselves what lies behind economic actions and organizational practices, between innovation and tradition, between what is really new and what is not; between neophilia and neophobia” (Sicca, 2018, p. 9). This question may help explain why it can be useful today to reflect on this research-action work experience, with its distinctive methodology, given that the use of narration in social sciences, in its various forms, is always a method in which “the production of meaning is a retrospective process, which needs time” (Czarniawaska, 2018, p. 47).

The second reason is that the audience comprised, without any apparent sign of amalgamation, former *workers*, victims of the process of production restructuring, with groups of marginal underclass, in many cases with a strong “deviant” connotation – typical of the Neapolitan area –, which still today characterizes part of the *movement* of the unemployed. The third, but no less significant, reason is that the participants in the training course were not such because they belonged to any institutional or corporate “organization”; nor were they chosen through a public “competition”, a selection, a ranking or by any other criterion. They took part in the course simply because they adhered to one of the various “lists” of struggle, sometimes sponsored by political or non-political factions, which, from the mid-1970s to today, have emerged within the “movement” of the organized unemployed (several works are available about the history and features of this phenomenon, which is however outside the scope of this paper). The original aspect of

this factor that is most relevant to our discussion is the one directly related to the process of “formative growth”, since it is not quite usual to lead a lifelong learning path addressing a rather heterogeneous audience that is however homogeneously affected by the turbulence of a determined, effervescent “political” *movement*. That is an organization with a strong, albeit generic, *antagonistic* connotation, which gathered people belonging to the “weaker classes”, that is, those coming from areas of authentic, very serious, social disadvantage; individuals characterized by deeply-rooted inclination to illegality (also because they belonged to delinquent families and were familiar with crimes), as well as individuals that were highly influenced by an ideology, animated by typical “revolutionary” feelings; in short, it was an audience that regarded the course itself as a “goal of the struggles”, as a preliminary step for the “conquest” of a permanent job position. It must be pointed out that all the events dealt with in this paper were truly experienced, but, similarly to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous studied by Bateson (2001), the people involved in the path herein described will not be named, or if so, their names will be fictional; likewise, the “environments” will be described so as to prevent any single person involved from being identified. This criterion was, for example, also used by Sandra Vatrella (2015) in her interesting work on the “training” of detained migrants. Here to follow some questions that we can propose as research questions. There is at least one in particular that has proved to be very meaningful to my experience: what do these adult men (and women) expect from a training course? What do they hope to get from this experience? What expectations will this experience raise in them? Apart from better chances for them to find employment, do these adults “demand” anything else from the path through which they will return to work after the “training” course? The hypothesis we are going to formulate here is that, in addition to the expectation of achieving economic and professional stability, they also hoped to form their own identities, to feel valued and be socially recognized; that is, they felt the “urge” to create their own gratifying images, one in which they could identify themselves and feel gratified: all factors that are closely interwoven with the objective of work and employment. In other words, as individuals, in a *micro* dimension, but, similarly to large apparatuses or institutions, these people seem to be looking for a type of “legitimacy” that is no less importantly “symbolic” (Cipriani, 1986).

To put it even more simply, the hypothesis underlying this research study is that these people, like everyone else, forcefully demand their own “identities”; often, even unconsciously, they also feel a need for a change. In conclusion, one of the fundamental objectives, of the aims, of a useful training course must be also to provide people with adequate tools to focus on this issue, with all the related hopes and expectations, and to identify some strategies to adequately meet such needs.

To this extent, *lifelong learning* can also give hope, that is, as a *property of the field of solidarity*, a sign of recognition coming from “social formation, which is able to answer the questions raised by the collectivity: who we are, where we come from, and where we want to go” (Alberoni, 1986, p. 24).

The course, the audience

Let us now analyze the characteristics of our reference audience. It consisted of 360 people (only 41 women), aged between 20 and 60, who had lost their jobs or had never had one; many of them had not completed compulsory school or not even primary school, prey to the most varied types of “drop out” (see Grimaldi, Romano & Serpieri, 2011); most of them were offenders, some with impressive criminal records. In order to have a more precise idea of who the participants were, during the days preceding the beginning of the courses, the teachers had tried to collect as much information as possible about their audience, by reading the documents provided by administrative offices about each participant. Several attempts were also made to talk to some of them informally so as to learn as much as possible about the audience we were going to deal with. We filled many notepads with the information gained during the whole cycle of meetings, which lasted more than 6 months. The training centre was located on the western outskirts of Naples and the classrooms were furnished with single desks and a slightly larger desk for the teacher. Sometimes the tables were arranged in a circle, which was then the topic of heated and even fierce discussions that divided the students between those in favour of such democratic, egalitarian, and “symmetrical” “proxemics” and those who asked, instead, for the typically hierarchical, diversifying, and “complementary” classroom setting (see Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1971). However, the classrooms were located on three well-aired, bright floors. In short, those facilities substantially met the adequacy criteria required for the training activities, and this aspect was anything but marginal (Favretto & Fiorentini, 1999).

The participants had been divided into 14 groups, each class with an average number of 24 to 27 trainees. The “groups” were formed quite randomly, but some of the classes, for one reason or another, and also based on the study of individual profiles, appeared to be more problematic to manage. It was clear that, in some cases, it would not be easy to have the “learners” trust the teachers, or to raise motivation and participation. The entire teaching staff tried to be extremely professional, but I think that an attentive observer would have easily noticed the deep tension behind their behaviour.

It is necessary to say that, during the talks with the course managers and some tutors, the teachers had explained the considerable difficulties that they were encountering in teaching and, not least, in the attempt to build

a cooperative “environment”, one in which at least the most basic rules of behaviour and civil coexistence would be observed.

In short, the training course addressed to the unemployed promised to be a path characterized by “hindrances” and complications – and it then proved to be so; indeed, it was characterized by some moments of great tension, not only emotional tension. Nonetheless, the several suggestions coming from the course both from the scientific perspective and from a personal viewpoint have raised the awareness of the need to formally write down this experience.

Methodology-related issues

As far as methodology is concerned, remarkable and intriguing aspects of a genre that it is not improper to define as “reflective” (Schon, 1993) can be found in his study. On the one hand, the urge is felt to present in a faithful and deontological way the basic criteria, the traditional methods, but also the “creative” intuitions that guided the work on the field, as well as the style whereby this experience has been reconstructed; on the other hand, there is the need to convey the essential meaning of the work in a text of reasonable length, so as to comply with the most usual – I would say *mainstream* – rules of the scientific literature in the field.

First of all, it should be clarified that the weaving of complex stories of adults, related to the need to tell a sociological experience – with the opportunities offered by a path where a methodology of analysis, which has the strength of the work in progress, is constructed – has made the use of the narrative method (Czarniawska, 2018), even in its “expressive” declinations (Romano, 2012), the most suitable one to convey the significance of the experience, as well as the most useful didactic methodology in the field of training (Striano, 2005; Landri, 2010; Caramiello, 2015).

Countless texts focus on this particular approach to social science, which, broadly speaking, is characterized by a typically qualitative research methodology. The concept of narration plays a central role both in this particular experience and in contemporary social sciences in general. In this paper, we have tried to bring together what seem to be the two most relevant perspectives of this approach: “to view storytelling as a form of knowledge, to view the act of telling stories as a way of communicating” (Czarniawska, 2018, p. 22).

Beyond the age-old debate on the explanatory validity of such works compared to strictly quantitative methods of analysis, they clash, however, with a dilemma from which the social sciences (perhaps *all* sciences) are unable to escape, that is, the relationship between the observer and the object of the investigation. Obviously, this is a matter that simply cannot be

evaded, not even when the issues discussed are standardized as much as possible. This question, of course, becomes a huge problem when we are faced with procedures in which “storytelling” is assigned a crucial role, and which, therefore, are inevitably subject to the constraints of subjectivism, if not *impressionism* (of which also Simmel was accused), or to forms of conditioning, unescapably linked to the ways and times of the hermeneutical process, which is subject to interpretation (Ricoeur, 1985; Eco, 1990; Landri, 2006, 2010; Iavarone, 2015).

And yet, this hermeneutical perspective, typical of storytelling, has made this method particularly suited to the needs of the course: the narrative devices, in fact, become extremely relevant when it is necessary to explicit the epistemic positions of individuals acting in a situation, from which we can understand the vision that they have of their own actions, based on their own cultural background, their personal stories and their own experiences (Striano, 2005; Fabbri 2007; Fabbri & Romano, 2018).

Perhaps the most useful indication derived from the experience, which is recalled in these pages, concerns the several possibilities to turn to communication, to seek critical confrontation, to use different forms of the language, albeit unconventional ones, thus creating a flexible method that can be constantly reworked (Caramiello, 2015).

Being able to tell about oneself, while listening to other life stories, becomes a re-discovery and a re-construction of one’s own existential project, functional to a wider project of transformation and evolution of the subject: this type of self-telling does not mean just telling a story; it is above all a narrative thought about oneself; each individual re-tells the story, and puts under a lens of critical observation his/her own “competences”, thus becoming different and more open to new possibilities of learning and orientation (Benadusi & Molina, 2018) compared to their usual ways of thinking and ways of affection (Fontana, 2000). In this regard, the main, fundamental objectives of emancipation and *empowerment* of the individual have made the use of the narrative method – which is interwoven with the now widespread methodology of *storytelling*, with its several applications – the most useful and suitable training strategy: telling life stories, and sharing them within groups of critical discussion, helps making learning environments significant, thus promoting processes of reflexive interaction through the creation of cooperative contexts, thanks to which each individual can develop a more conscious perception of his own life.

The narrative process gives rise to a *setting*, which generates a kind of “magic”, in which listening becomes experienced participatory listening, so that the learning process can undoubtedly be facilitated. The narration, for both the narrator and the listener, needs the thread of the story to be resumed by placing the events in a context of meaning (Batini, 2000b).

Through plays on words, listening and request-response activities, and by building opportunities for growth and skills improvement, the narrative experience expands the semantic fields related to the understanding and interpretation of a relational and life space to which the individual belongs (Demetrio, 2000); this allows for more conscious and rational management and planning of one's own life path.

In short, they are specific moments dedicated to the reconstruction of the individual's personal biography. They not only bring events and facts to light, but are also moments of reflection in which, thanks to storytelling, the individual is able to tell what his or her life has been or could be like, through declinations that prove to be opportunities for cognitive education, for the obvious reason that planning self-representation or self-evocation fosters thinking processes that are both peculiar and open to generalizations, which the trainer accurately must try to enhance (Demetrio, 2000).

As far as the meaning and value of our work is concerned, in both the phase of the training activity and its textual "reconstruction", one significant aspect has to be underlined: clearly we have not aimed at "understanding" the phenomenon of unemployment in its wide and general economic or political dimensions; we have only tried to *interpret* it, in the "simplest" way possible, by asking ourselves the following questions: who are these people? how do they live? what do they think? what are their needs? what are their dreams? Of course, every man (or woman) has a unique and unrepeatable life story; and yet, the question to be asked is: to what extent the "deep" questions of the unemployed in the south of Italy should be different from those of every "outcast" anywhere else in the world? And it is paradoxical that, by working in the field of training, we were able to "find out" also a possibly suitable answer to another fundamental question, perhaps an ontological one, which we had only partially considered: what do such people really want? What do they expect from the "training" course? What else, I mean, besides work? Besides a permanent job? Besides financial security? The hypothesis underlying this research study is that these people, like everyone else, forcefully demand their own "identities"; often, even unconsciously, they also feel a need for a change. In conclusion, one of the fundamental objectives, of the aims, of a useful training course must be also to provide people with adequate tools to focus on this issue, with all the related hopes and expectations, and to identify some strategies to adequately meet such needs. Clearly this objective is also central to this paper, not least in a "self-reflexive" perspective.

This is what "training" is, among other things, especially when it concerns adults, and what function the work of the sociologist can perform within training paths. It is the activity whereby change as a whole can be brought about. A change in the way the trainees – or, better, the individuals

– interact with the context; a change activated or simply stimulated by the work of the trainer (see Alessandrini, 2004); but it is also the transformation in the trainer's own attitude, generated by the impact that the "feedback" he receives – that is, the trainees' emotional, cultural, and behavioural "responses" – has on his own methodology, and even on his own identity. When this happens, it means that the mechanism works well.

This is perhaps also the reason why a non-formal approach has often been fostered between the trainer and the trainees, which has many times resulted in more open interaction. The fact is that one cannot hope to induce a transformation in others if he or she is not ready or willing to understand or experience firstly the personal consequences of such transformation. And it is also on this basis that some "accounts" have been chosen among the many available (clearly we can include only a few excerpts in this paper), as they seem to be more "emblematic" than the others for the scope and objectives of this study.

In short, we did not want to produce a mere "abstract" discussion that would outline the sociological theories – and delve deeper into it – underlying the activity of re-socialization of a marginal audience; this contribution, indeed, also evokes some of the life stories of "real" people, as well as the dynamics affecting the "teacher" himself, *i.e.*, the training of the trainer on the field.

In other words, given that – as Morin (1985) explains too – any sociological research is always, first of all, "sociology of sociology", then the sociology-based *narrative* (Besozzi, 2005) of a peculiar formative path can and perhaps must also be sociology of the sociologist himself, namely an account involving the real, emotional, and professional life of the scholar and the context where he lives and works (Lorenzetto, 1960, 1976; Alberici, 2000; Colombo, Giovannini & Landri, 2006; Iavarone, 2015).

Therefore, we have tried to combine the qualitative scientific report with the narrative method, in order to report a case experience, which deals with problems and nodes of adult education, sometimes referred to as *andragogy* (see Knowles, 1987). This matter is by definition elusive and uncertain but, in present-day society based on continuous learning, it attracts the attention of national and international communities of scholars. It increasingly requires the attention of experts as well as of those who hold multidisciplinary skills (Cambi & Contini, 1999) and certain creative attitudes necessary to take on the role of "trainer of a new type" (Tomassini, 1995, p. 32).

The evolution and dynamism of contemporary society require increasingly innovative methods of cyclic and permanent training, aimed at identifying and enhancing the skills, abilities, and competences of individuals who, by finding their own identities and self-fulfillment, contribute to the

development of the entire social structure in a creative and conscious way (Chianese, 2015; Benedusi, Molina & Viteritti, 2019).

These were the fundamental methodological and conceptual assumptions which have guided us when we worked on the training course addressed to unemployed people; in short, these were the underlying theories functional to solve or at least to “handle” some of the difficulties that have arisen time after time.

Clues and explor-actions

It must be pointed out that with regard to the activity of sociologists, we had to deal with ordinary problems alongside with widespread “distrust” – which extended from the course takers to the other teachers – about the value and meaning of this kind of training activities.

However, we were concerned not only about the difficulties of the work to be done. There was something else, which we would only be able to realize a few months later, thanks to a fellow engineer. One day, as he was commenting on the “success” of our lessons with the trainees, this colleague said something about his difficulties with them, which we felt as clarifying:

I cannot communicate with the course takers and I am aware of that but, after all, I teach a technical subject, which is even quite difficult, and I can still give myself the alibi that the learners do not have the necessary pre-requisites to understand the educational programme, which is something however unquestionable. In short, even if I had to consider my performance as a teacher in this course in a negative way, this would not compromise my identity as a professional and a scientist. For you it is different: you are a sociologist, and losing a professional “challenge” of this kind is an overall failure for a sociologist: to put it simply, it means that he is not good enough as a social scientist.

Was he right? I cannot say. Perhaps his was only a frightening “reduction” of “complexity” of our scientific horizon; in any case, for those scholars of our branch who have always tried to combine the research and analysis of models for interpreting social interaction on one hand, with the attempt to interpret everyday behaviours and the local area on the other, the training experience with the unemployed was to be regarded as an appointment not to be missed.

We spent many days to analyse the data about the audience, trying to understand the criteria whereby the classes had been formed, the levels of education of course takers, their professional backgrounds (if any), and their social backgrounds. Yet, we soon realized that it was quite useless to look for criteria or rules: that audience had been taken from “lists”, which had been made based on how frequently they participated in demonstrations,

the determination they had shown during clashes with the police, and were controlled by “political” leaders and “charismatic” leaders of various kinds. Perhaps only one principle underlying the formation of groups could be identified: that of greater or lesser homogeneity of groups, whether “ideological” or “anthropological” homogeneity. But I had partial confirmation of this only later on. And so the courses finally began. But a fundamental question remained unanswered: what should or could be taught to those people?

The modules that we were teaching – based on what those who had designed the course had previously established – took us several hours a day, spent, in turn, in the various classes. But there was often confusion about the timetable, as well as sudden changes to it. The management of the organizing consortium, in short, seemed to be in the hands of people who were incapable of serious coordination work or uncommitted to it, more focused on the bureaucracy on which the disbursement of public funds depended than on the quality of the training project, as is often the case even in traditional school projects (see Serpieri, 2002). Our modules dealt with “socialization”. From this point of view, the scientific horizon related to the term – especially with regard to its meaning in the context of “training” – provides various starting points for reflection. We could have started from orientation, and then deal with the fundamental themes of communication, convergent and divergent thought, the *Pigmalion* effect, verbal and non-verbal strategies; we could have chosen some *role playing* activities, collected more systematic information on their social backgrounds, or compared some data and promoted “socialization” understood as the dynamics of “group” structuring. It would have been undoubtedly useful; but we had the feeling that in that context we had to dare more, and we felt that it would not be enough to use ready-made tools. If we really wanted to be successful, we had to try to “build” a new tool, time after time (Schon, 1993).

Thus, reproducing what is probably a fortunately widespread habit in sociological studies, we tried to start from the foundations. We began to rethink the “classic” meaning of “socialization”, as described in handbooks: the experiential cycle of primary and secondary learning, in which individuals acquire the fundamental “rules” to manage their relationships with the environment they live in. It did not take too long to understand that, from this point of view, many of the course takers’ lives had great empirical value. Almost each of their life stories, indeed, represented a peculiar, creative or, even better, “reflexive” response (Giddens, 1994) to the problems of adaptation to their habitat: a solution that, once analyzed in its context, revealed a character of remarkable imagination and intelligence, which in many cases was functional to the aim of getting by in certain conditions. Sometimes, the geographical and social areas characterized by several problems and high turbulence (Ball *et al.*, 2012) are, indeed, real laboratories of creativity; in

short, they represent useful spaces for the *emergence* (Kauffman, 2001; Merton, 1959) of possible strategies of innovation and change.

Those people had managed to “survive” (in some cases even pretty well) and, given the harsh “environment” in which they lived and in consideration of their difficult life stories, they could be regarded, in terms of “socialization”, as an even exemplary inventory. This is a presupposition that has proved useful to focus on and from which it was inevitable to start (Pombeni & D’Angelo, 2001, pp. 158-159). It was used as a starting point for communication, to avoid any separation between us and them, which would have hindered real “communication”. The discourse about the programmed theme of socialization thus became inevitably secondary.

Of course, it was not easy to communicate with them, to have them trust us and to create a cooperative environment. Class “F” was certainly one of the most difficult of all of them to deal with. Many of them had not even completed primary education; almost all of them had been in prison; someone had had (or still had) problems with drugs. On the first lesson, it was immediately clear that it would be a really tough experience. I said “good morning” to the class and sat down at the desk. Someone responded mechanically and distractedly to my greeting, but no one stopped what they were doing. The door then remained open and many of them kept going in and out of the room. Four of them played cards in a corner, surrounded by a few spectators. Others talked about stories of cigarette smuggling. Some others smoked alone. Another group was having heated discussions about the football championship. I do not believe they did it to spite me: indeed, it would have been an interesting sign of a response. They just ignored me, or seemed to do so; it was as if I had not entered the room, as if I did not exist. I placed my briefcase next to my desk, cleaned the board and showed my intention to start the lesson. But I did not even say a word. I observed the situation and remained in silence for more than 40 minutes. I did not write or read the newspaper, nor did I do anything on my own: I did not try to isolate myself from them. I simply kept on looking at them, one by one. Almost everyone turned their back to me. Every now and then some of them, who felt observed, turned around, crossed their eyes with mine for a moment, but they soon continued to do what they had been doing until then. Yet, suddenly, as if they had taken a unanimous and sudden decision, they stopped their discussions and one by one slowly took their seats. They turned to me and were now all opposite me. I kept looking at them; you could not hear a pin drop in the room. Then one of them, perhaps their leader, asked me if I was the new sociologist (I found out that they had met one or two sociologists before me, but they had soon resigned). I can say that they “looked for me”, “asked” for a contact, or, more likely, they decided to “respond” to my paradoxical behaviour. It is a technique that I have also used on other occasions;

it may be a derivative of experience, the silent strategy whereby one tries to convey a message of competence, determination, strong personality, and willingness to take risks. Frankly, I do not know. So far, I have done well. And now they were sitting, in silence. We could start.

Stories and traces of life

In essence, I was aware of the fact that “good” training is one that allows both the trainee and the trainer to discover something, which they previously ignored, about themselves or the others. Therefore, if I wanted to begin to communicate with them, I had to – as Blumer would say – “put myself in their shoes” somehow but, obviously, if I had totally shared their attitudes and behaviours, I would not have had any valid argument to propose the adoption of other behavioural patterns, and I would have weakened the fundamental part of my message referred to the importance and the need of change. If I had legitimized their “code”, how could I have promoted the idea that another existential pattern should be adopted? I was imprisoned in a “paradoxical” situation: it was my “double bind”, in Bateson’s terms (Bateson, 2001, pp. 236-323), and I could only get out of that impasse by using a “creative” strategy.

I felt that it was necessary and possible to build something good, but my building would not have held up unless I had provided it with strong foundations. I needed them to learn about at least the basic “abstract” categories; otherwise the communication would have merely entailed simple tales, self-referential micro-stories. If I wanted to escape the *double bind*, it was necessary to have them somehow consider facts in their broadest dimension, for example in relation to the passing of time, to historical changes, to different time periods. That way they would understand that the “reality of things”, even when it is apparently static, is anyway the scenario of an endless transition, a continuous and inevitable change (see De Sanctis, 1978), which is slow and gradual or, sometimes, simultaneous and sudden. This was demonstrated by whole human history and the way it has unfolded in different places on Earth (Lorenzetto, 1976): this could not but be relevant also for individual stories (Caramiello, 1987; 1998; 2003). I do not believe it is a really striking discovery: it is simply a trigger for communication, a relational method, a communication technique that can be used in diverse contexts, whenever participants show “resistance”, or are rather reluctant to change and deny any possibilities of change.

During the course, most students appeared to largely agree with this view. However, this ideas on “change” were met with opposition from the most ideological and radical groups, a real “active minority” in the audience. Such resistance was due to the fact that they identified the general histori-

cal-social progress with the “capitalist restructuring”, with its critical consequences, starting from increased marginalization. It was a mental operation that, for some of them – who came from the “factory” experience and had personally suffered the consequences of losing their jobs as a result of several operations of industrial restructuring – had solid real-world foundations. Here follows the clear, harsh, and well-written “manifesto” whereby some of them welcomed me:

Let’s put the cards on the table. We do not think we need any sociologists. We clearly reject any activities involving “socialization”, “motivation”, your so-called “orientation”, “development of human resources” or any other kind of strange ideas that you intend to propose to us. We are already extensively “socialized”, we have built our identity through social struggles. We are part of a “critical”, conflictual, antagonistic culture, based on the rejection of the existing social order, while the social science that you would like to propose to us only aims at favouring the psychological integration of the masses within the socio-political system. It is appropriate for you to consider this premise with great attention, so that we can avoid any misunderstanding.

No wonder they had such a hostile attitude. For many of them, innovation had resulted in personal exclusion and ghettoisation, from which they had tried to come out by finding, especially in certain ideological frameworks, a powerful tool to legitimise their own identities.

It was obviously a severe limit. Yet, the scheme could work anyway to foster communication. Therefore, it was not inappropriate to start from their concrete condition, from their experiential dimension (Dewey, 2014a; 2014b), because this would not have prevented us from making progress; conversely, it became functional to the possibility of creating other stories and new tools and strategies to make them real. In other words, it was certainly necessary to start from the context, from their real life experience; but, if we did not want to get stuck and merely “record” data, it was crucial to be able to identify and, somehow, to follow even “transcontextual” paths (Bateson, 2001, p. 318).

In this sense, life stories and, therefore, narrative and biographical work, can be regarded as formative chances intentionally proposed “to those who have not got previous habits, and who, then, will be encouraged to try some; first by finding in their memories the times, spaces, movements and rhythms of their previous experiences, through narratives that had remained unfinished due to laziness and fear but can then be subsequently developed” (Demetrio, 1996).

The course takers participated in workshops of reflection and critical confrontation, which, on one hand, were somehow similar to feminist collectives for raising self-awareness (Irigaray, 1990; Collettivo Benazir, 2012), but,

on the other, turned out to be T-Groups, that is, the *sensitive training groups* promoted by Lewin (1961) in the USA in the mid-1940s: those experiences were much appreciated by Rogers (1976), who had a strong influence on the “training” paths started in the 1960s at the Olivetti in Ivrea (see Saibene, 2017). Further essential inspiration on both an epistemological and operational level was derived from the experience of the help groups of Alcoholics Anonymous, admirably examined by Bateson (2001). These “systems” of relationships provided, in various ways, moments of socialization to raise awareness, self-orientation and self-care, based on the strong belief that, in adult life, communication, autobiographical training, and storytelling can be powerful tools to promote the individual’s autonomy and to strengthen their own life projects.

Movement and institutions

In this framework of reference, and in the light of the particular situation, it is clear that socialization itself became the space of constant “resocialization”, a space where both “imaginary” and real conditions are unceasingly built to “get adapted” to the changing society and its mechanisms of communication (Morcellini, 2013).

“Socialization”, in this sense, provided a chance of governing the mechanism of “feedback” and consequently a device to be used in order to live out another real and possible social space, that of change, in an effective way.

We had started from their real conditions, their “status”, but we could not linger on that for long; nor did we want to. There were other territories to explore, other worlds to discover. Hours and hours of discussion, rivers of words, plenty of examples, protests, consents, *i.e.*, communication. Participants were sometimes active, sometimes unwilling to talk; sometimes engaged, sometimes uninterested; they sometimes shared ideas, sometimes quarrelled.

On a general level, one of our main objectives was obviously to trigger a possible mechanism of identification or simply some kind of understanding, moving towards a broader framework to find their identities: the State, democracy, the Country, Europe, the human community.

We tried, in short, to raise a possible sense of belonging in relation to *meta-systems*, where it would be more difficult to reproduce the “familistic” attitude, which, in many ways, I saw reappearing – even in an “amoral” way – also in the radical and revolutionary sphere of their organized movement.

The feeling of deep distance from institutions and democratic living – which the teacher somehow “represented” and was therefore viewed with distrust – is evident, for example, in Bartolo’s passionate words pronounced after I had pointed out, during a heated discussion about a story of jealousy

and betrayals, and plans for revenge, that in a civilized country, with legitimate institutions, no one can take the law into his own hands: “The State, the Law... but what the fuck do you know about the State, the Law? You only know the bullshit you have read in the books”.

The fact is that the course takers had known the social and institutional structure only through the teacher who had expelled them from school, through the sacristan who kicked them out of the oratory, through the local policeman who prevented them from playing football in the streets, through the “master” who would pay them, in black, a poor salary, through the welfare worker who would take their children away from them, through the judge who would have given them 10 years in prison, through the politician who would have bought their votes; that is, they had known only the oppressive, harsh, severe, and repressive side of the organized society, or its vulgar and cynical side. And these men and women had built up a cultural and material sub-system to oppose this “primary scene”, which had severely affected their lives. Their sub-system was a self-governing microcosm, a “community” capable of filling, at least partially, the structural and symbolic void inside them, the lack of identity that they had been feeling since childhood: the “movement”.

There is a lot of criticism towards the “movement of the unemployed” – which is, outside my specific experience, a generic expression referring to a phenomenon that has gone through different phases and takes very different forms of organization); and I imagine that much of the criticism, especially what many say about its often rebellious and violent attitude, is grounded. The fact remains that it was and still is, for a large number of people, an amazing *locus* of individual and collective identification: an extremely “complex” cultural container of hopes, needs, desires, rejections, meanings, and possibilities.

The pride for having managed to get by anyway, together with the resentment about their precarious and disadvantaged status, clearly resounds in the words of Giuseppina, a mother who lived in a “basement” in the neighborhood of Scampia and was a cigarette smuggler. In response to the remark that social workers probably had good reasons to suggest that the judge should take her child away from her, she replied:

My dear sociologist, don't worry. I'll raise my next son in Posillipo, in a beautiful villa, with a garden and direct access to the sea too... happy? I thought you were smarter than that. But you don't understand shit, just like the others. I had cleaned that house up and sorted it out. And anyway, it was no worse than the place where I grew up. And the boy went to school clean and well dressed. He was healthy and every day had something to eat. Of course I couldn't buy him caviar, but I bought everything he needed.

During the meetings, the communication between the learners became increasingly interesting as they started to interact more, and I noticed that behavioural dynamics, communication and relations had significantly improved – progress that also the management signalled to me, after all. However, I still had a persistent doubt: as they lacked new references and relational mechanisms in their daily lives, would the possible behavioural transformation not be vacuous, illogical, or useless? What if the result of our meetings had given way to a new form of uprooting? That is, an increasing difficulty to identify themselves with their original anthropological universe, without a new ground to welcome them after the transformation? Were their possible new identities likely to end up with no reference point on the ground of sociality? – Thus becoming misfit in society, albeit in a different way? I justified myself by thinking that, in many cases, new motivations, higher awareness and self-esteem, and more open-mindedness can also help people achieve better material living conditions. And anyway the lessons could not solve the course takers' problems related to socialization and work opportunities. The teacher's task was to raise their cultural and civil standards, foster self-confidence, enhance their psychological and behavioural flexibility, and increasingly enable them to learn how to learn (Morin, 1983; Rogers, 2012). In short, we had to provide them with the greatest number of tools possible and of the best quality possible to promote new goals of emancipation, their overall growth as individuals and their ability to relate to the world, especially through more conscious self-perception. Therefore, their search for an *identity* (see Pecchinenda, 2008) was one of the most problematic issues to be resolved. For some of them, who were radically "marginal", the reasons why they participated in the movement, and in the courses, were quite clear, but for others, who had somewhat different socio-cultural profiles, they were less comprehensible. Reflection on this aspect was triggered above all by Giorgio's words about a well-educated girl, who came from a "respectable" family, and whom he was "seriously in love" with:

Obviously I needed to meet her parents. I had no problem with that. I have already said that I was serious about her. Only one question made me feel uneasy: when her father asked me "what do you do?", what would I say? – "I'm a fisherman". And what would he think: "shall I let my daughter marry a fisherman? And who the fuck is a fisherman? How many fishermen do you know? People only buy the fish on display at the fishmonger's, who knows when, where, and by whom it was caught. But today nobody knows what a fisherman is like. What is a fisherman's status in society? Who would let their daughter marry a fisherman?"

Here is a clear example of a "demand for an identity". And who knows how many others have experienced similar existential traumas. Giorgio was

able to talk about it because he has got a strong personality, but how many others feel secretly tormented and are haunted throughout their lives by the question “who am I?”; how many others are secretly in search of themselves, their own role and their meaning in the world, without being able to tell anyone about it or beign even unaware of it? It was really a big problem, which did not concern only Giorgio, or the unemployed. It was a problem that affected also the trainer, more than he was willing to admit. And this could, or better, was to come into play in the “pedagogical” mechanism.

In this sense, sharing life stories during critical discussion sessions – which were somehow similar to the experience of the help groups of Alcoholics Anonymous studied by Gregory Bateson (2001), has certainly proved to be a functional strategy to achieve the desired objectives, albeit partially, and to cope with the highly problematic context of reference. For two reasons: first of all, this methodology is characterized by ductility and flexibility, which are typical of the *work-in-progress* action; secondly, the learner is given an active role in the learning process, based on the belief that resocialization or orientation are complex processes involving several different variables.

In this regard, it is important to underline that the process of “restructuring” concerns both the trainer and the trainee. It clearly emerges when an eminently systemic research perspective is taken as a strategy of signification, whereby the processes of knowledge construction are interpreted as cooperative and in context: “there exist well-known and legitimate differences between the two roles, but both these social and cultural “roles” have become aware, also thanks to the narrative paradigms, that they are co-constructors of knowledge itself, within an evidential and contractual paradigm” (Batini, 2000). Obviously, the need for a “magister” is not questioned; yet, the dual nature of educational dynamics must be underlined: the teacher and the learner change together, through a dual and recursive process.

Concluding remarks

The perspective promoted during the lessons is, therefore, an evolutionary, *transformative* one (Mezirow, 2003): re-socialisation, in this sense, means being able to change and narration supports the process of learning how to design one’s own identity, starting from the adult subjective dimension, from the subject’s own capacity to question themselves, and to explore and interpret the world (Chianese, 2015).

In this sense, the narrative-dialogical path fostered in the training courses for the unemployed is clearly aimed at encouraging the transformation of individuals through a methodology that is in line with a complex and authentically modern conception of the person and society, whereby change

and evolution are interpreted as the most complete framework of meaning (Dewey, 2014c) for new paths of transformation.

The intensity of the experience – both from an emotional and a didactic viewpoint – with the Neapolitan unemployed led us to try to write in a coherent way about the vastness and richness of the suggestions that emerged, thus giving rise to a sociological narrative, which tries to relate the nuances and colours of *fiction* with the structure and form of scientific research, within a specific framework of reference.

The experience herein narrated took place in a particularly problematic context, characterized by high uncertainty, which we tried to manage through a flexible, changeable and *in-progress* set of learning strategies, built time after time through what Schön calls a *reflective conversation with the situation* (1993): as it was impossible to follow ordinary programmes of study or hold workshops and other structured activities, neither dogmatism or preconception, nor pre-established teaching methodologies – although sometimes reassuring – could be applied, in order to deal with the real context and to meet the real needs of the trainees.

The individual who tries to reconstruct his or her own story is urged to reorganize data and information in order to dislocate his or her personal knowledge in relation to the crucial intellectual and phenomenological dimensions, pertaining to the mental mastery of the narratological categories of chronologies, territories, otherness and evolution. All adults, indeed, when telling their own life stories must also show their ability to use such cognitive categories, which are essential; every fact needs to be anchored within the categories of time, space, relationship, destination or evolutionary aim. In this sense, learning to apply first of all to oneself the “structures” aimed at re-designing new life projects or at the re-reading the past is a moment of resocialization and specific training (Demetrio, 2000).

A mature identity, indeed, is also constructed through forms of narrative identity bricolage, that is, through a process of accumulation of *petites morceaux* of stories we have heard, and have been told, which explain what we have seen and what has happened to us and to others. They can be called *relational narrative heuristics*, thanks to which individuals can build more conscious processes of interpretation of themselves, of the relationships they establish with other social actors and, in general, of their own existential paths (Batini, 2000). One thing is evident: “narration, in studies and organizational practices, enables us to understand spheres of existence that are often kept apart and that in the future we will increasingly need to connect to each other in the construction of our containers” (Czarniawska, 2018, p. 262). What repercussions and significance this understanding may have, on the ground of the results of such a dynamic action as lifelong training, is clearly an issue that remains open to further research.

The question is obviously quite complex, both on the theoretical side, since it involves several variables, scientific paradigms and speculative interpretations of phenomena, both on a more practical side, relating to the difficulty of managing such problematic situations – which require effective strategies both at a “micro” level –, relating to each individual’s life and possibilities, and at a “macro” level, i.e., in relation to the general organizational-economic structure of society.

It is certainly not easy to evaluate what the Neapolitan unemployed involved in the training activities have gained from our “training” path.

With regard to the “outcomes”, the general results of the training process, we do not have precise or systematic data about my learners’ achievements at occupational and social level in the years following the course; we only have incomplete information. We know that, except for a few friendship bonds that have been consolidated, they no longer meet up as frequently as they used to in the years of their “movement”. Some, among the eldest, have died of natural death. Two or three younger trainees were killed during one of the various Camorra wars; a couple died from drug overdose; another 6 or 7 have ended up in prison, some of them not for the first time; but the vast majority have managed to get a permanent job. Several of them were hired by the local garbage collection company; others have got a job in some of the municipality’s subsidiary companies, engaged in technical or other services; some others have become stretcher bearers or even nurses, and work for local hospitals. And there are also those who have obtained a high school diploma, and therefore have become employees or officials in various branches, mainly in the public administration. Among them, there was a young woman, now a mature woman, who has become an appreciated union leader, responsible for the Equal Opportunities Commission of her organization. Probably, if we could get in touch with all the trainees, we could draw up some accurate monitoring data sheet regarding their lives and even dare to formulate hypotheses on how the training course has affected their professional and life paths, that is, on the results it has produced. It would be hard (and probably fruitless) work. It may be easier, instead, to verify whether some research hypotheses formulated at the beginning of this discussion have been confirmed. In this field, some answers can be found. We had asked ourselves: what do socially marginal adults expect when they undertake, willingly or by force, such a training course as the one herein “narrated”? This can be somehow considered – also in the light of the remarks illustrated at the beginning of this paper – the main “question”, the ultimate question of the present discussion. One first, important answer is that certainly, they look for a new apparatus of conceptual instruments and knowledge, functional to become gainfully employed and to achieve economic wellbeing, that is, a stable income: in short, they hope that, as a result of the training,

they will be able to access good jobs. Yet, we are convinced that this is accompanied and intertwined with a broader aspiration, an even stronger desire: they demand their own identities; they yearn for social recognition; they have an irrepressible will to find a place in the world, a space for their identities in which they can be fully recognized, in which they would not feel humiliated and their self-esteem would not be mortified. This central research hypothesis, in my opinion, is widely confirmed, although I could not provide exact figures, quantitative or systematic data to support it. Indeed, a qualitative approach has proved more suitable to the nature of the phenomenon herein investigated – which is mainly focused on the theme of identity; especially as a result of the fact that we have deliberately chosen the narrative strategy in this research work.

Adopting Umberto Eco's (1988) distinction between lists and narratives, it can be said that this work is definitely closer to the second perspective: a table, with all the "results" in perfect alignment, that is, a systematic, orderly "list" (albeit a list of people who used to be, but are no longer, unemployed) "will never be able to compete with the allure of a story" (Czarniawska, 2018, p. 64). But the fascination of the story, despite enriching the hermeneutical potential, obviously does not protect us from the risks of overinterpretation: such risks still remain, no matter how many efforts are exerted to avoid them. On the other hand, these variables are typical of a mainly observational research study, in which data were collected through several methods ranging from direct observation to participant observation, from focus groups to in-depth interviews, the so-called "life stories" (Marradi, 1980); this method was chosen in order to collect the standardized information that are "necessary according to the rationale», but also taking into account that something unexpected might be found, which is related to the charm of discovery" (Corbetta, 1999, p. 412). From this point of view, we absolutely cannot underestimate the fact that "the narrative structure of human life involves unpredictability and it is for this reason, paradoxically, that the alleged failure of social sciences to formulate rules and foresee a result is actually their greatest achievement" (Czarniawska, 2018, p. 33). Considering this fact exciting, or consolatory, is a matter of hermeneutic freedom, or arbitrariness. Finally, scholars, experts and operators in the field, also have this choice, to be made. Always.

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