

Lifelong Learning and Career: Research Proposal in the Human Resources Management

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Abstract: The importance of the training processes for the construction of career trajectories, understood in terms of professional success or consolidation or advancement within a business, constitutes a heuristic lead for which it is possible to detect the social construction of specific profiles of competence. The research hypothesis featured below aims to achieve this type of detection.

Keywords: Lifelong Learning, career, human resources management.

1. Capability and career trajectories: the person-organization relationship and the development of learning

In what is defined today as the *knowledge society*, where “intangible assets” are the instrument and outcome of economic-productive systems heavily dominated by innovation, the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion expressed by an increasingly complex social system are radically changing. At the same time, the strengthening of the strategic value of the policies for learning and training attests, more than in the past, the need to formulate

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general and specific strategies that interpret and valorize lifelong learning as a fundamental lever for the development of active citizenship and equality in accessing opportunities. Placing everyone in condition to learn means supplying each individual with the necessary skills to improve his/her conditions of life and strengthening the autonomy of individual choices, towards a greater awareness of one's own capabilities.

Hence, training takes shape as a process of "construction of self" involving the individual in all phases of life (from the initial institutional training, to professional training, to *post-experience* training, up to permanent, life-long training), the organizations (Alessandrini, 1994), the local communities (Orefice, 1978; Orefice, Sarracino, 1981) and, in a wider sense, society.

During the 1990s, some emerging traits of the socio-economic system – such as acceleration and drive to change, intensification of the processes of technological innovation, globalization of markets and competition – made it possible for training to start being conceived of as a strategic factor of competitiveness for businesses (Boldizzoni (Ed.), 2003, pp. 189-222), owing to its connections with the creation of distinctive organizational competencies and the new *employability* needs of the workers (Costa, Giannellini, 2005, pp. 225-252).

It is during these years that, based on the ISO regulations for the evaluation of production processes, the concept of "quality" applied to training policies and processes is introduced (Isfol, 2002). On the basis of this approach, the evaluation of the quality of training tied to the effectiveness for job placement and the development of organizational professionalism, also in career terms, starts becoming increasingly important.

In this context, the importance of the training processes for the construction of career trajectories understood in terms of professional success and superior performances, constitutes a field of enquiry in which it is possible to retrace the convergence of a few thematic lines configuring the training process as an educational activity whose main objective is the promotion, the spreading, the development and the updating of knowledge, in a perspective of cultural, social, professional and personal growth of the individuals.

The first thematic line emphasizes the dialectic relationship between learning and change and the double significance of the relationship for the subjects, on the one hand, and the organizations, on the other (Mezirow,

2003). The training action is in fact an educational activity aimed at the development/updating of the subjects' knowledge and, provided it aligns itself with certain conditions, it can become an instrument for organizational change. The first of these conditions sees training thought of and carried out in terms of a process whereby the relationship between individual learning and organizational change can be positively defined. This also implies a strategic orientation, assigning the training processes a crucial role in personnel management and in the strategic planning of the organization, thus attesting an effective mixture between the instrumental and cultural dimension. The latter, in fact, cannot be disregarded in name of a learning exclusively achieved budgetarily but must be the pivot for a valorisation of the subject, of the individual with his genetic, biological, social and cultural wealth (Guetta, 2001).

By favouring the subjective dimension, it is possible to identify those contributions that, despite being part of the wide reflection on the theme of permanent learning, lifelong learning and the strategic importance that the acquisition of innovative competencies acquires in the process of economic-productive development, place particular emphasis on the individual.² From this perspective, learning is not understood from a merely instrumental and functionalist point of view as regards the economic growth of societies, but essentially as an opportunity of growth for individuals and of promotion of human development understood as freedom. Freedom of thought, of experiences, of life, that each individual possesses in a perspective valorising the empowerment dimension and where the privileged relationship is the one between competence and individual. In this sense, knowledge is not perceived as an obligation or as a functional prerequisite for economic development, i.e., as an exclusively

² We refer to A. Alberici, 2008 and C. Catarsi, 2007. In particular, in Alberici, 2008 the reflection is divided – as expressed by the Author at the start of this essay – in three thematic axis representing the “essence” of the whole volume.

The first starts off from a conception of *lifelong learning* as a method for dealing with social complexity based on the principles of inclusion aimed at the development of democracy. The second thematic axis highlights the centrality of the reflexivity in training, a necessary process whereby the various forms of learning interweave to constitute source and resource of human and social development and growth, thus encompassing exclusively economic-functional logics. In the third, particular importance is given to a redefinition of the “gender” in lifelong training, aimed at encompassing the stereotypes that all too often mark the training processes and paths, to focus the attention on the process of construction of identity/identities known as “adultization”.

organizational-professional need, but can be experienced concretely as a permanent opportunity for human growth. This basic argument “places at the centre of growth strategies the ability of individuals to live those lives that make it possible to appreciate and extend the real choices available to them. Concepts such as capability³, enablement, fundamental freedom, become objectives and not means and assign a strategic function acquiring value as such (value of use) to the great challenge of training and cultural growth of human beings, in addition to the important reasons of the active role of individuals in the economic and productive development” (Alberici, 2008, p. 11).

Instead, by favouring the organizational dimension, the focus shifts on the “personal” or, according to one of the definitions that has become established over the last decade, on “human resources”, understood as “the set of knowledge, cognitive and behavioural abilities, individual skills, both inborn and acquired, having a possibility of productive use” (Padovese, Visentini, 2004, p. 15). Said definition is used when these individual characteristics are considered as a single organization, whereas when they are analyzed on the macro-economic level, one generally speaks of “human capital”.

In the organizational sphere, it is the function of direction of human resources that is specifically involved in the definition of personnel training policies supporting organizational strategies emphasizing – more than in the past and with immediately tangible implications in business practice – aspects tied to innovation (of process and product)⁴, internationalization and to the creation and spreading of knowledge and of a “valued

³ The main theoretical reference is A. Sen (Sen, 2001; 2007), who highlights learning to learn as a strategic meta-competence enabling the individual to orient him/herself in the complexity and pervasiveness of the changes distinguishing globalized societies. The subject becomes the protagonist of his/her training, developing the ability to give sense to actions and to take on a reflective attitude vis-à-vis his/her learning depending on his/her life path. This context sees the expression of the “*movement of reflective training*”, which, conceiving training as *theory in action* “implies a circularity between the dimension of *knowledge-theory* (of subjects, problems, plans, needs, fields; of general and specific knowledge, of competencies); of *reflective operativeness* (methods, training and evaluation activities, communities of practices), of the *production/result of new knowledge-change* (in the subjects, the context, the organization, the research strategies)” (Alberici, op. cit., p. 63).

⁴ Think, for example, at the educational action of supporting the innovation processes carried out by the *business schools* (Gemelli, 1997) and the *corporate universities* (Garbellano, 2006).

knowledge” necessary and coherent with the trajectories of entrepreneurial growth. All this is part of a wider process of creation/destruction of human capital (Antonelli, Leoni, 1995), which calls the attention on the key role of the educational and training system in the construction and expansion of knowledge, competencies and skills for a professional development increasingly tied to the dynamics of flexibility-uncertainty-tenability in the workplace and at macroeconomic level (Soskice, 1992). At the same time, said process calls directly upon the “personnel direction” as function dealing with the management of the various training instances that a process of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1942; 1993. La Rosa, Zurla, 1998), on the one hand, and of safeguard of capability, on the other, entails.

From this perspective, new conceptual categories, such as the *learning community*, derived from the *community of practice*, emerge as “observative instruments” of the training phenomena and processes directed at professional practice (Bertoldi, 2006). In particular, the “communities of practice” identify themselves as “operative communities” on which knowledge management initiatives aimed at obtaining a competitive advantage are based, and as “place” of reification of the social dimension of learning where problems of community, social practice, meaning and identity, all converge (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2007).

The second thematic line is emphasizing the planning dimension of training as an essential element to deal with the uncertainty inherent in the labour market and to give credible and reliable shape to training interventions whose quality and effectiveness is measured increasingly more in terms of *employability*⁵. This assumes that there is, on behalf of the institutions operating in the educational-training field, a particularly careful analysis of the training needs and objectives that can be met and reached. At the same time, it is the subject who has the duty of carrying out an operation reflectively founded and concretely practicable on his/her aspirations (or on that feeling of *grandeur* which we will refer to further on) and on those training paths that can support personal and professional growth and career advancement.

The explosion of symbolic culture highlights an important transition from a mass cultural system to a “personalized” cultural system, at

⁵ See, for example, Costa, Battiston, Gubitta, 1997 and Vescovi, Pasqualotto, 1998: two studies carried out by the CUOA – University Business Organization Centre - on the competitive positioning of Business Administration Masters, which offer interesting points worthy of further analysis for the study of business training.

individual request (owing also to the development of new technologies), which allows a considerable increase of self-education and democratization of information opportunities (Frabboni, Pinto Minerva, 2003). However, the excessive personalization poses problems of effectiveness and credibility to the planning of training interventions, which risk, on the one hand, to bolster a market of “*self-service* training” lacking control and specific aims (Cortellazzi, 1996) and, on the other, of being drawn into the spiral of commodification of appearances: “whereas in the past the tendency to lose sight of the all too human substance of the society of *producers* could be ascribable to commodity fetishism, now it is the *subjectivity fetishism* that conceals the commodified reality, excessively commodified by the society of *consumers*” (Bauman, 2008, p. 60).

The third thematic line is interpreting learning and the valorisation of competencies as central elements of an educational system oriented towards *lifelong learning* in which it is possible to activate bridging mechanisms between the educational-training system (the formal dimension of the acquisition of knowledge and competencies) and the professional dimension (i.e., the wealth of learning acquired through the profession and life experience in a wide sense).

An implementation of procedures and instruments for the recognition and validation of experiential and professional competencies in adults is constituted, for example, by the systems of *Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience* and of *Validation des Acquis Professionnels* in France (Feutrie, 2008), and by the systems of *Accreditation of prior experiential learning* (APEL) and of *Accreditation of prior learning* (APL) in the Anglo-Saxon world (Colardyn, Bjornavold, 2004).

The actions undertaken in this direction are not only aimed at the valorisation of competencies acquired during one's lifespan, but also provide useful elements whereby the professional identity of the subjects involved can be better defined and strengthened.

Within the reference framework just described, training emerges as a sector of activity of primary interest, in particular with regard to the crucial role it plays in the processes of acquisition of knowledge and development of skills (Quaglino, 2005a; 2005b) and in the processes of organizational development (Alessandrini, 2005), not to mention as field of studies of interdisciplinary importance, where contributions deriving from sociology – especially educational sociology (Catarsi, 2007; Ceccatelli Gurrieri (Ed.), 1995) – economy, psychology, anthropology, and law, all converge.

Having identified in this background the crucial role played by the management of human resources as organizational function specifically appointed to deal with the development of human capital, it becomes important to ask what is the significance of the training processes for the construction of a career in the field of personnel management, what are the training paths, both formal and informal, that allow the development of a key professionalism as the one in question, what are the elements that define a professional identity so full of responsibilities with regard to the opportunities for learning and personal and professional growth of the human resources.

According to the most recent articles of Italian sectoral journals such as *L'impresa. Rivista italiana di management*, a monthly publication of "Il Sole 24 Ore" (founded in 1959), and *Direzione del Personale*, quarterly publication of information and culture of the Associazione Italiana per la Direzione del Personale [Italian Personnel Management Association] the questions arising re the "human resources function" (Bona, 2007; D'Ambrosio, 2007; Fatiguso, 2010), the figure of the personnel manager – in the double role of *HR Manager* and *HR Specialist* – and his/her career, are numerous (Fatiguso, 2010; Florio, 2009; Rebor, 2008). Questions are raised on the evolution of personnel management in Italian businesses, on future horizons and on the ones already present in the "human resources" (*HR*) profession, on who the new "heads of staff" are and what competencies they have. At the same time, there is an increasing reflection on the significance of the training processes for the updating and assistance of experience in the field of this specific "professional family" which, if on one hand plays a strategic organizational role in the definition of the policies and actions of personnel training (Stringa, 2008), on the other it increasingly projects its operational space towards the outside: "a tension to adopt wider objectives, including the commitment to achieve synthesis with regard to contrasting needs, emerges. Developing human resources also means contributing to the resolution of conflicts, operating in a dialectic context of cultures, values, objectives" (Rebor, 2008, p. XII).

In the past few years, a few initiatives that have taken shape in the reference professional associative contexts have found place in the debate on the organizational role of a function that started to develop its own recognizable identity in Italian businesses starting from the 1950s (Padovese, Visentini (Eds.), 2004).

The foundation of the “Registro Nazionale Italiano dei Professionisti HR/Italian National Registry of HR Professionals” (D’Ambrosio, 2008), created by the AIDP (Italian Association for Personnel Management) is symptomatic. The association has been present on the Italian and European contexts ever since the 1960s – with the objective of identifying, certifying and developing the professionalism of those operating in the field of management of the individual-profession relationship, holding a role that, over time, has been the object of metamorphoses tied to the socio-economic context and organizational-managerial dynamics. The Registry was established in keeping with European Directive 2005/36/EC, heading II, of Legislative Decree 206/2007 on the recognition of professional qualifications and the free circulation of workers within the EU and Ministerial Decree 32054 of 28th April 2008 on “the identification and recording of institutions in the list of Associations representing at national level the regulated professions for which orders, registers or boards do not exist, and of the non-intellectual services and the non-regulated professions”.

1.1. The career perspective

Which are the factors contributing to place our life trajectories along a satisfying path, one of self-realization, of “capacitation”, where motivation and results achieved constitute a positive *match* for the individual? Which are the relationships that take shape between individual and organization? How can the social networks and the resources that can be derived by them – in terms, for example, of “associative social capital” – influence the training processes underlying the acquisition of strategic⁶ or distinctive

⁶ The second part of the previously mentioned work by A. Alberici, 2008, provides an interesting overview on “strategic competence” for human capacitation. Christina Stringher, the author, re-examines said concept in light of the wider context of international literature and provides a comparison between four theoretical-operative learning to learn models – the *Helsinki model*, the *Alberta project*, Gibbons’ cube and the ELLI (Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory) project – to then proceed to identify differences and analogies essentially based on the concept of “power to learn” interconnected with the more strictly motivational aspects of the individual. Stringher herself defines a conceptual map based on distinguishing the concept of “learning to learn” from other similar concepts, to then position said conceptual category at the crossroads of two paradigms – that of *Lifelong Learning* and that of the evolutionary age – with the objective of identifying common and distinctive features within them.

competencies useful for the development of one's career? To what extent can the differences between the subjects, their motivations and their aspirations be "safeguarded" if not valorized? Which of these issues does the organizational function entrusted with managing personnel tackles in terms of developing "human capital"?

Beginning from the professional dimension⁷ – the one in which it is by and large easier to retrace actions finalized and strategically designed to reach specific objectives – that unavoidably interweaves with all the other aspects of identity and the life stories of single individuals, it is possible to identify some points worthy of further analysis to answer these questions.

The first is the one leading us to consider the conceptual category of *grandeur* (Boltanski, Thévenot, 1991) as perspective whereby it is possible to read the professional motivations and aspirations – and much more – supporting the career path of individuals.⁸

Boltanski and Thévenot construct their framework of analysis starting from the definition of six different worlds, or "cities", interdependent on each other, where the subjects are involved.

"Outlining a first typification of the viable "regimes", the two authors identify six ways of "discussing in terms of justice", metaphorically corresponding to six "cities", which define in different ways the position (*grandeur*) of an individual: the *inspired city*, where the position is

Beginning from the contributions of G. Bateson, Paolo Di Rienzo, provides instead an "ecological vision of learning" and the concept of learning to learn is invested with new meanings by virtue of being located in a wider context, where the life and learning systems of human beings are strictly interconnected with each other, giving life to new and transformed contexts. The very reflexivity dimension "refers to learning processes lasting for the entire life cycle and allowing to construct meanings from experience, within a perspective of critical conscience, global citizenship and planetary responsibility" (Alberici, op. cit., p. 134). From this perspective, evaluation also becomes an integral part of the individual's reflective process, which focuses on the "*transitional meanings*", i.e., the ones deriving from shared meaning-giving processes, rather than on knowledge specified on the basis of formally defined objectives.

Another contribution providing plenty of in-depth analyses is the publication edited by ISFOL, 2003.

⁷ See, on the subject, the *self-determination theory and the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in professional learning* contained in Pellerey's contribution, "Nature, diagnosis and development of the self-determination and self-regulation capability in learning and in the transfer of professional competencies" (Isfol, 2004, pp. 150-191).

⁸ In the book the authors, starting from a series of empirical studies on the sense of justice of individuals on the workplace, analyze the conflictual dynamics in which the subjects are forced to justify their actions by referring to widely recognized justice criteria.

acquired by accessing a state of grace, which “establishes an immediate relationship with the higher principle”; the *domestic city*, where the position corresponds to the status held in a hierarchicalized order of family functions; the *city of opinion*, where the position depends entirely on the opinions of others; the *civic society*, where personal ties are mediated by the general will and where acquiring a *grandeur* entails a partial departure from one’s own “particular” private; the *market city*, where the position is connected to the power that can be exerted on the exchange of rare goods and on the possession of resources aimed at said objective; the *industrial city*, where the position depends on effective professional skills” (Catarsi, 2001, pp. 72-73).

The *grandeur* refers to a position, to a physical space that the individual aims to reach through an ascending

path of success, but it is also a sign, a symbol of the “measure” the subject gives him/herself in relation to others, a modality of placing oneself in a scheme that is not necessarily predetermined, but potentially open to all. In this perspective, the career becomes “aim of *grandeur*”, wherein the planning and targeting of training actions is a necessary condition to be able to ensure oneself a part of the finite space⁹, to share with others with regard to whom one’s own aspirations can result conflictual.

It is a peculiar connotation of “social position”, which finds itself in between other positions and implies a careful assessment of the social ties accessible to the subject and an ability to seize the opportunities implied in the proximity networks. “The assessment of the available goods focuses on the totality of social relations significantly promotional which results accessible to the market actor: thus the emergence of a so-called “project culture”, where every mental inclination (inventiveness, flexibility, knowledge, competence, calculation) is aimed at the achievement of an exclusive *grandeur*” (Catarsi, 2007, p. 102). “Convenient actions”, i.e. the ones determining a given outcome with regard to the objectives set and the situation in which objectives are pursued, also find place in this scenario.

The second point worthy of further analysis – complementary to the first – concerns the modalities through which the subjects come strategically in contact with social networks functional to the development of a given

⁹ We refer here to L. Boltanski’s *Les cadres*, 1982, where the results of an impressive research the author had conducted on the political-organizational processes leading to the establishment of the category of “business executives” in France from 1930 up to 1970, converge.

grandeur and which can be also interpreted in terms of convenience. In this case, the implications that interpersonal relations have in determining the meeting of labour supply and demand acquire particular importance. According to one of the founding contributions of this line of thought – Granowetter on the “strength of weak ties” (Granowetter, 1998) – the role played by the social networks in the labour market¹⁰ is one of the key passages whereby the processes of *job matching* (both when looking for the first job and in terms of career advancement) can be interpreted.

These processes, in fact, are based on a positive use of personal contacts, which take shape as “zero cost investments” capable of supplying complete information, in keeping with the needs of the subject and filtered out of noisy information. In these instances, the information has a high qualitative value – especially if the number of passages is kept to a minimum, which is also an element predicting effectiveness – and can engender idiosyncratic job matches, where the opportunity signaled is not compared to others, but is chosen by virtue of the very signal received.

These mechanisms – based on the notion of *embeddedness*, i.e. on the function carried out by the rooting of social networks in economic-type transactions – are essentially fuelled by the credibility of information, by the trustful relationship between interlocutors and by the reputation of the subjects and are characterized by the “disinterestedness” regulating the relationships between the parts: “*the manifest lack of interests characterizing many social relationships – their “gratuitousness” and fortuitousness – constitutes a guarantee of the truthfulness of the economically important information conveyed*” (Ibidem. P. 92). It is from the disinterestedness characterizing the social tie that the “weakness” of the very tie derives, a necessary condition enabling each subject to reach a greater number of individuals, compared to social networks characterized by “strong” ties.

It is on the same conceptual horizon that the third point worthy of further analysis places itself. It concerns the ability of the proximity networks to represent a source, more or less direct, of social capital for individuals, both in terms of social capital defined as *bonding* – when mechanisms of trust and reciprocity between members of the same social

¹⁰ See, for example, the essay by F. Ramella and C. Trigilia on “Strong and weak ties in the social construction of inventions” [n. 1/2010 of *Stato e Mercato*], where, via the analysis of the networks of collaboration, the social and relational conditions facilitating innovations are highlighted.

network are triggered – and in terms of a type of social capital defined as *bridging* when said mechanisms are triggered starting from a given network directed towards a subject external to it, exploiting those “bridge” dynamics the weak ties mentioned above refer to (Di Nicola, Stanzani, Tronca, 2008).

These mechanisms are retraceable in the different forms of social capital: the “family social capital”, i.e., the resources deriving from the relationships between the family members living together; the “relationship social capital”, which extends the first form to involve other parental figures not living under the same roof; the “extended community social capital”, relating to networks of friends, of work colleagues, characterized by a degree of openness towards the outside; the “associative social capital”, i.e., the resources derived by networks made up of subjects belonging to the same association; the “generalized social capital”, the one resulting from generalized interpersonal trust and from the trust in the mediation ability of the institutions.

Each form of social capital identified constitutes *networks* – from the micro to the macro dimension – whereby the individual can constructively set in motion exchanges and establish fruitful relationships to rely on a series of “resources” (which range from acquiring information to seizing opportunities) usable in terms of career construction.

The “feeling” of *grandeur* – or of personal effectiveness in the achievement of excellence¹¹ – as well as the possibility of being able to fuel and support it by means of weak ties and proximity networks, proves itself an important approach for the exploration of the *career* dimension in that it places the personal aspirations of the subject within a series of *networks* – more or less interdependent between themselves – whose characteristics and modalities of approach on behalf of the individuals influence the career trajectories, to the point of foreshadowing their successes and failures.

At the same time, it is interesting to verify the individual strategies and training choices aimed at the development of one’s professionalism and the construction of one’s life (*the fabric of one’s life*)¹².

¹¹ We refer here to a publication by Caprara, 1996, where the author deals with themes tied to motivation, effort, to the strength of convictions from a strictly psychological perspective, but placing the results of said reflections in organizational contexts in which the human factor as strategic factor of success, which has to be valorised according to the potentialities it possesses, acquires particular importance.

¹² We refer here to Levinson’s contribution “The Structure of Individual Life” in Saraceno (Ed.), 1986, pp. 123-142.

“In a world of alternative lifestyle options, *strategic life-planning* becomes of special importance. [...] Life-planning is a means of preparing a course of future actions mobilized in terms of the biography of the self” (Giddens, 1999, p. 111). But it is also a way of seizing *chances* or approaching opportunities, in order to be able to situate one’s own life project in an individually acceptable and socially recognizable “space”.

From this perspective, the life project can be defined as the “substantial content” of a reflectively identified and organized trajectory of the self, i.e., as one of the possible paths to follow with relation to the objectives that each subject aims to reach.

In the dimension of planning and targeting of one’s choices according to objectives of self construction and definition, those moments that prove crucial and those decisions whose consequences end up having a particularly strong impact on the direction given to one’s own existential path, acquire particular importance.

These are the instances that A. Giddens calls “fatal moments”: “much of the daily life, so far as the individual is concerned, is inconsequential, and is not seen to be particularly fateful for overall goals. However, some avenues of activity are usually thought of by the person in question as more generally consequential than others – such as activity carried on in the sphere of work” (Giddens, 1999, p. 147).

Work and ambitions can hence be reasonably placed among those processes of constant construction and remodeling of one’s self which acquire particular importance in terms of planning.

Investigating the significance of the training processes for the professional choices of the individuals – starting from the awareness that the labor dimension cannot be treated as totally distinct and separate from the other existential dimensions – means exploring and analyzing the life projects of the single individuals, their “professional identities” and their modalities of “colonization of the future”. “The universe of future events is open to be shaped by human intervention – within limits which, as far as possible, are regulated by risk assessment” (Giddens, 1999, p. 143).¹³

¹³ In order to better define the concept of “risk”, we quote Giddens: “Thinking how things might turn out if a given course of action is followed, and balancing this against alternatives, is the essence of political judgement. Machiavelli is celebrated as the originator of modern political strategy, but his work gives voice to some rather more fundamental innovations. He foreshadows a world in which risk, and risk calculation, edge aside *fortuna* in virtually all domains of human activity. [...] The notion of risk becomes central in a society which is

It is arduous to establish a priori to what extent the single training events can be considered “fatal moments” of one’s own life story, however, the method of the autobiography can facilitate the access to those meanings identifiable only in connection with the subject and that can acquire importance in the conscious construction of a professional career only through interpretation.

2.A research in the field of human resources management: the choice of reconstructive models and the objectives of the enquiry¹⁴

The “life stories” constitute, in the present study, the main heuristic model for the observation and the analysis of the careers of *HR* professionals. It is a reconstructive modality, based on a narrative approach, that is used increasingly often to describe both the stories of individual subjects and the stories of community or collective subjects.

In the organizational-managerial field, there is no shortage of examples: from the “Trajectories of enterprises and entrepreneurs” (Gennaro, Scifo,

taking leave of the past, of traditional ways of doing things, and which is opening itself up to a problematic future. [...] The *openness* of things to come expresses the malleability of the social world and the capability of human beings to shape the physical settings of our existence. While the future is recognised to be intrinsically unknowable, and as it is increasingly severed from the past, that future becomes a new terrain – a territory of counterfactual possibility. Once thus established, that terrain lends itself to colonial invasion through counterfactual thought and risk calculation.

The calculation of risk can never be fully complete, since even in relatively confined risk environments there are always unintended and unforeseen outcomes. In milieux from which fate has disappeared, all action, even that which sticks to strongly established patterns, is in principle ‘calculable’ in terms of risk – some sort of overall assessment of likely risks can be made for virtually all habits and activities, in respect of specific outcomes. The intrusion of abstract systems into day-to-day life, coupled with the dynamic nature of knowledge, means that awareness or risk seeps into the actions of almost everyone” (Giddens, 1999, pp. 145-146).

“In modern social conditions, the more the individual seeks reflexively to forge a self-identity, the more he or she will be aware that current practices shape future outcomes. In so far as conceptions of *fortuna* are completely abandoned, assessment of risk – or the balance of risk and opportunity – becomes the core element of the personal colonising of future domains” (Ibidem, p. 169).

¹⁴ The present study began as part of the postgraduate degree course in “Qualità della Formazione: Saperi delle Differenze e Sviluppo della Conoscenza” – Scuola di Dottorato *Scienze dell’Educazione*, University of Florence, Italy.

1997), where the voices of the main players of the Italian economic-productive context follow one another to construct a profile of the entrepreneurial fabric that has characterized the economic development of our country, to the “Lists” (Varchetta, 2005), individual stories whereby it is possible to read and interpret the organizational reality; from “The human resources” (Ferracuti, 2006), a journey through life and work stories offering the reader points worthy of further analysis on a diversified “collection of professions”, to “Women without a shell” (Pogliana, 2009), a set of autobiographical evidences of being a woman in the enterprise, on women’s approach to *management* and on the eternal career/family dilemma.

And also: from “Following the thread of memory. Fifty years of Pirelli and environs” (Manca, 2005), a precious reconstruction of the transformations and the growth of Italian entrepreneurial activity through portraits of its key players, to “From heirarchy to leadership. A professional life at Fiat between theoretical models and operational practices” (Auteri, 2004), an example of professional autobiography from an organizational perspective.

And it is through this type of reconstruction, achieved through in-depth interviews, that *the present study aims to investigate the processes of definition of career trajectories in the managerial field and the importance of the training processes in creating the conditions for professional success in the field of personnel management.*

From this perspective, the training value of the autobiography is also implied: in fact, the autobiographical work lends itself to be interpreted as a useful instrument to reflect also on one’s own professional competencies and on the possibilities of growth and improvement.

The choice of the method of life stories, used from a chiefly sociological perspective¹⁵, is motivated by the coherence between the characteristics of

¹⁵ “The disciplinary confines are particularly important because biographies are a type of literary representation having ancient origins, important instruments of historical analysis, they represent the crucial basis for the detection of exemplary types in psychology, they constitute the window through which anthropology observes unknown worlds. In all these cases one of the main means of access is the story. As opposed to literature, in social research writing does not constitute an objective in itself, but a vehicle of thought; unlike psychology, sociology assumes the existence of a collective referent wherein to situate the single life; for sociological analysis, as opposed to history, time is not the starting point whose value can be defined a priori, but the result of a theoretical choice asking itself how

the method itself and the reference theoretical horizon within which the present study places itself: professional career as component of life story, but also as an opportunity to fulfil *grandeur*, construction of one's own self and public image.

"The life story is quite generally considered a personal document, a specific form of personal narrative, belonging to the genre of oral history" (Cipriani (Ed.), 1995, p. 105), but it is at the same time "a cultural and historically circumscribed product understanding individual duration as a social fact through the dynamic comparison of the individual dimension of the social with the social meaning of the individual" (ibidem, p. 107).

Albeit in a derived way compared to the use of the life stories method, also the methodological approach based on *network analysis* techniques will be considered, on the basis of which the strategic formulae according to which the single individuals use their social networks and the ties – strong or weak – they have with the other members of the same networks, will be detected, in order to seize training and career opportunities in one's own professional field. From this perspective, career opportunities are not seen in terms of statistical probability – an approach typical of the deterministic approach of the casual models – but retraced on the basis of the detection of the "social capital" pertaining to each individual. Hence the focus shifts on the "occupational groups", on the relationships and exchanges within said groups and on the modalities whereby the subjects mobilize to their advantage the resources derived from the networks they belong to, from the information circulating within them and from the habitual attendance of environments characterized by varying degrees of social openness-closure (Chiesi, 1999, pp. 31-33)¹⁶.

With regard to the value and use of the biographies and life stories as main source for the analysis of social networks, we have provided below a passage from A.M. Chiesi, also to take into account advantages and limitations of the analysis of networks conducted through field research.

and why the present opens itself towards the past that is reconstructed and recognized *ex post*" (Bertaux, 1999, p. 15).

¹⁶ The first chapter of the publication, "What is and what is the purpose of the analysis of networks" provides four examples where the analysis of networks proves itself an instrument particularly suited for the survey. The theme of career is also present: "First example: how to look for a job" (pp. 27-29), "Second example: how innovations are spread" (pp. 29-31), "Third example: how to advance one's career" (pp. 31-37), "Fourth example: density of the social relationships and psychophysical malaise" (pp. 31-33) (Chiesi, 1999).

“Field research has shown the difficulties inherent in the gathering of information often concerning potentially delicate ties. In fact, it is not surprising that assigning great theoretical significance to the relational information engenders in the subjects a certain reluctance to reveal the real structure of the networks they take part in. This does not only concern the gathering of information on the networks of informal power in the organizations, on the relationships between members of an *élite* [...]. It is clear that in the first case the recognition of a substantial deviation from the official organization chart can be feared as source of conflict, in the second case the relationships of a truly strategic nature tend to remain confidential [...]. Thus, it is not surprising that *network analysis* experts have developed the sociological imagination to the maximum degree with the aim of avoiding direct questions and replacing them with indicators, sometimes very indirect, drawn from public documents of various types: indexes, lists of members of associations, organization charts, family trees, wills, writs, contracts and notary archives in general, articles where people are mentioned and which can even feature biographies” (Chiesi, op. cit., p. 60).

Since, in our case, the interviews are in-depth and aimed at the reconstruction of professional careers in the context of the life stories of the personnel managers belonging to the same associative group (AIDP Toscana¹⁷), the relevance and the effectiveness of the analysis of the networks manifests itself in a double dimension.

In fact, the results that can be obtained by applying this approach, can, on one hand, clarify in what way and to what extent that set of relationships in which the subject is involved is perceived of in terms of “associative social capital” from the interviewees and, at the same time, suggest a reflection on the significance of said capital in terms of career possibilities. On the other hand, the results can give us interesting information concerning the modalities of managing relationships and exchanges within a specific *network*, on how the subjects involved in said network are linked to other types of social networks and what information flows they have access to, by means of their “bridges”, in order to identify training opportunities which are important in terms of professional development.

¹⁷ The Associazione Italiana per la Direzione del Personale (Italian Association for Personnel Management) was founded in Milan in 1960 and is currently present throughout Italy via 16 regional groups. It belongs to the European network EAPM - *European Association for People Management* and to the world-wide one WFPMA - *World Federation for Personnel Management Associations*.

2.1. Articulation of the research and expected results

The population examined is made up of the Gruppo Toscana of AIDP whose members are, at the time of the survey (July 1st, 2010), a hundred and forty one.

The working hypothesis plans to identify the sample on the basis of a specific characteristic: that of being, or having been, professionally engaged, during the past five years, in a role of personnel management in private or public organizations. The choice of examining all the subjects for whom, in the associative state, said characteristic is highlighted, is motivated by the restricted number of subjects belonging to the sample thus registered (85), which nevertheless gathers a fundamentally significant and representative group.

Given the operational time limits of this survey, they would not be guaranteed if an analogous sample were extrapolated based on the names of the members present in all regional groups.

“Where representativity is concerned, for example, there is not only the strictly statistical one, reproducing in the sample the numeric characters of the universe considered but also the thematic-type one, which observes the crucial aspects of a phenomenon through the peculiar life of a few subjects who express their own orientations and behaviours, which also belong to wider categories of people. This is why, in the field of qualitative sociology, the experimentation of a representativity that is at the same time thematic and categorial, without the pretension of undue generalizations, is practicable” (Cipriani, op. cit., p. 321).

The process of reconstruction of the professional careers of the personnel managers members of the Tuscan AIDP group is articulated according to two main phases, each of which is based on a series of specific actions. The first phase, a preliminary phase and one of preparation to the actual field work, involves:

- 1) Analysis of the reference population and of the characteristics of the subjects making it up.
- 2) Definition of the reference sample by means of the individuation of those who are currently holding, or have held in the last five years, roles of personnel management within public or private organizations (reasoned choice sampling). Therefore, other typologies of AIDP members will be excluded, e.g., entrepreneurs, consultants and self-employed professionals.

3) Individuation of the themes on the basis of which the in-depth interviews should be planned and drafting of the surveying instrument.

4) Sending (via e-mail) to the single members of the sample, a letter introducing the survey, together with a request of availability to take part in the aforementioned survey. This initiative has already been favourably received by the managerial bodies of AIDP Toscana.

Said intervention will filter the sample depending on the cooperative willingness to elaborate the survey themes and will be decisive in circumscribing the structure of the survey. With reference to the latter, a few possibility hypotheses on the consensus on the interview can be made:

- a) 30% of positive answers: constitute an adequate level of significance and representativeness;
 - b) positive answers > 30%: constitute an optimal level of significance and representativeness;
 - c) positive answers < 30%: in this case we will proceed to assess the life stories centred on an individual testimony or, alternatively, to widening the sample via the so-called *snow ball* modality.
- 5) Analysis of the “interview scheme” and relevant fine-tuning with a casual group of 5/10 subjects belonging to the reference sample.

The second phase, essentially characterized by field research by means of in-depth interviews aimed at the reconstruction of professional biographies, is articulated in:

- 6) Individual meetings with the subjects who gave their availability to be interviewed.
- 7) Carrying out and recording individual in-depth interviews.
- 8) Elaboration of the documents produced by means of interviews and analyses of the data collected through the use of IT programmes in keeping with the surveying instrument used.
- 9) *Follow-up* meeting with the sample involved in the survey or with small groups, in connection with peculiar elements emerged from the single professional biographies collected.
- 10) Giving back and distributing the results.

The study, on the whole, aims to achieve the following results:

- a) identifying the main career trajectories that have characterized the professional development strategies of the personnel managers interviewed, starting from the reconstruction of their life stories, with particular focus on the professional dimension;
- b) verifying the importance of the training processes in general and of university training in particular, in constructing personnel managers' professional success, both *HR Managers* and *HR Specialists*;
- c) determining the significance of the specifically pedagogical component in undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications of subjects having developed managerial-type careers;
- d) examining the incidence of the *gender* component and of the generational differences in the hierarchical position of the organization and in professional development opportunities;
- e) configuring the effects produced by the originating role and *networks*, with regard to the interception of personal training and career opportunities;
- f) identifying the personal and professional implications engendered by the personnel management function, with a view to taking part in business training policies.

2.2. Definition of the surveying instrument

As mentioned above, for the reconstruction of the professional careers, the instrument of the in-depth interview will be used. The aim is to investigate some thematic areas that are deemed particularly significant vis-à-vis the assessment of the importance of the training processes in career development, training processes which shall be compared and discussed in the preliminary meeting at the start of the individual interviews which will involve a small group whose members will be chosen casually in the context of the reference sample.

The interview, in keeping with the objectives of the research, focuses on the individual, i.e., on the characteristics of his/her role, on the development of his/her competencies, on his/her educational credentials, on the professional achievements gained and on the training opportunities that, over time, have enabled to reach positive outcomes.

Table 1. The framework of the sensitizing concepts

Theme	Expected information
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First contacts with the managers of the reference organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Reconstruction of the story of the previous career of the interviewed subject.</i> - <i>Highlighting of the social networks that have facilitated the first contacts.</i> - <i>Examining the awarding of personal merit that the interviewed subject has perceived being active during the first contacts.</i>
Establishment of the contractual relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Description of the juridical-administrative engagement formulae.</i> - <i>Differentiation of the "tie" perspectives on the separate fronts of the reference organization and of the interviewed subject.</i> - <i>Report on the conflicts emerged at every stage of the work commitment.</i>
Intra-business relationships and socio-technical elaborations of the role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Recording of the friendly relationships developed in the professional context and used as a "bridge" to access possible non-corporate networks.</i> - <i>Identification of the main organizational responsibilities of the role, in connection with the description of the personal reasons for professional satisfaction.</i>
Contextual dynamics in sentimental and family life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Recording of the moments of life of the interviewed subject, where professional opportunities are introduced.</i> - <i>Analysis of the choices made with relation to a conciliation between the public-organizational and the private dimension (work-life balance).</i>
Social, cultural and political relationships favoured or requested by the role held	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Recording of the affiliation to one or more professional Associations.</i> - <i>Highlighting of the social networks the subject belongs to for reasons that cannot be directly linked to his/her organizational role.</i>
Progress of an intellectual and technical-scientific nature favoured or requested by the role held	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Highlighting of managerial training paths taken within the reference organization or autonomously.</i> - <i>Focusing on the knowledge and competencies developed through specific formal training or in situ actions.</i>

Inevitably, the professional dimension investigated, will interweave with the interviewed subjects' life story in a broad sense and it will be interesting to proceed to identify the mechanisms according to which the single individuals make choices in keeping with their objectives and motivations, deciding to seize or ignore professional opportunities and challenges.

We will take into account, albeit to a rather limited extent, both the information pertaining the reference organizations – the current ones but also, through comparison or assimilation, the previous ones – to identify some basic data (e.g., number of employees, reference sector, territorial context, current functions, full articulation of the personnel's function), and some information relating to the system and the policies of managerial training observable in the different organizational contexts.

This is due to three dimensions which can constitute the object of the interview:

- a) the “factual dimension”, which refers to the set of knowledge, skills and competencies possessed by the subject at the time of the survey;
- b) the “the retrospective dimension”, in connection with which the interviewed subject is asked to reconstruct the previous path and to reflect on the reasons that have guided the choices made;
- c) the “perspective dimension”, which includes the expectations, the ambitions and the desires of change of the single individual (Loiodice, op. cit., pp. 93-94).

The in-depth interview will hence be preceded by a personal data section where the data mentioned above must be recorded. Then, the framework of the sensitizing concepts, summed-up in the following table, will be explored.

By means of a *self analysis* process, the interviewees will be guided through the above-mentioned thematic areas and asked to reflect upon each of them and on the observable interdependencies.

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