

Collective dimensions of biographical work as research-training: biographical workshops under focus

Dimensões coletivas do trabalho biográfico como pesquisa-formação: oficinas biográficas em foco

Dimensiones colectivas del trabajo biográfico como investigación-formación: talleres biográficos en punto de mira

[Elsa Lechner](#) 

Highlights

More than a method, biographical workshops are a pedagogic, civic, and social instrument.

Group work that is experienced as a formative, transformative, and a social action process.

The theoretical-methodological specificity of biographical work is a simultaneous movement of autopoiesis and hospitality.

Abstract

The text focuses on biographical workshops as spaces and moments of experiential training with collective relevance. It draws from our experience promoting workshops among groups in different contexts of research and training, in which participants produce autobiographical texts to be shared. We present the protocol of these workshops, their theoretical assumptions, methodological process and results, in line with the current of life stories in Education in dialogue with a critical social analysis as a way to analyze the civic and political relevance of the private experiences of ordinary people in groups of collaborative and individual work.

[Resumo](#) | [Resumen](#)

Keywords

Biographical methods. Collective accounts. Research-Training. Action research.

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| Introduction

This text¹ focuses on biographical workshops as spaces and moments of experiential training with collective relevance. It draws from our long experience promoting workshops among diverse groups in research and training contexts², in which participants produce autobiographical texts about specific topics to be shared under written and oral forms. The protocol of these workshops is here presented as well as the theoretical assumptions, methodological process and results, in line with the current of life histories in education. In the horizon of a critical social analysis, the article is aware of the civic and biopolitical relevance of private experiences of common people as produced in groups of collaborative and individual work.

The proposed analysis results from 20 years of research and training work analyzing narratives of experience, and 12 years promoting biographical workshops in different national, international and institutional contexts (in schools, universities, online, with students, teachers, Portuguese emigrants in France, the United States of America, and Brazil, as well as immigrants in Portugal, or based on autobiographical works by migrants and refugees). As a methodological tool, the workshops occupy a prominent place here. They constitute a method of producing biographical narratives in a group, interested not only in autobiographical reports understood as an individual expression of experiences and symbolic references, but also as an extra-daily space-time of heterobiographical resonance. Therefore, biographical workshops are here understood as a context of community building and sharing of humanity in diversity contexts, and in practice. In this sense, these workshops are more than a method, becoming also an instrument of pedagogical, civic and social action, which is experienced as a formative, transformative and social action process. The main argument of the text is that the biographical work in these workshops creates a sense of belonging, and enhances intercultural relationships that are more respectful, hospitable and aware of the strength and vulnerability of each person. At the same time, it enhances the formative dimension of biographical work in a healthy collaborative environment of group work. This double movement of autopoietic and otherness/hospitality translates the theoretical and methodological specificity of the biographical work that reveals, in the space-times of its realization, the great practical effectiveness and collective reach of biographical workshops. Testimonials from on-line workshop participants during the pandemic are presented and analyzed in this article.

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2 Biographical Workshops with migrants: building collaborative work in the Portuguese context (PTDC/CS-ANT/111721/2009); Participatory media research among the Portuguese in New Jersey (Fulbright, 2014); Stories and memories of emigration (Gulbenkian PGLCP 065/209467, 2018); and Online Workshops (2020/21/22).

| The biographical workshops: theoretical assumptions and protocol

Biographical workshops are a methodological instrument based on the expression and sharing of self-experiences narrated orally or in a written form by the participants'. It can be used to develop research, or for action research, training/education, or even in a civic sense 'to build community' and a sense of belonging. It is a work dedicated to a clearly predefined theme to be addressed by the participants' oral and written texts about autobiographical experiences with a view to inter-knowledge in difference, reciprocal learning and joint reflection. These are reflective groups, in the terminology of some authors (Passeggi, 2011), used as focal groups in certain research contexts, discussion groups and inquiry communities in other contexts (Scott-Bauman, 2010), or *arbre à palabres* (Leray & Hamey-Warou, 2014). In our work we use the expression 'biographical workshops' in a literal translation of the French term 'ateliers biographiques' in which the author was trained by Professor Jeanne-Marie Rugira³. Also, this term is chosen because we situate our use/understanding of this instrument in a line of investigation-training that is distinguished from the type of research interested exclusively in the process of scientific inquiry or training in the strict sense. Indeed, from our perspective, biographical workshops are relevant in the field of social sciences and the humanities also because they translate into practice a non-unilateral exercise of social awareness. They contribute to subjective empowerment (new power of action of subjects who are often inaudible or marginalized in society), and to build feelings of belonging and social participation. As a whole, all these dimensions substantiate the civic vocation of the workshops as a scientific activity. The workshops also extend the production of knowledge to new audiences and participants in research and training, thus moving from a status of mere field interlocutors to an integral part of co-authorship and knowledge production processes. This participatory dimension seems particularly relevant and important to us, because it democratizes research and training, a process analyzed by few in the scientific literature on biographical research in the social sciences. Perhaps the closest term and practice to our workshops is the French *arbre à palabres* which, as Leray and Hamey-Warou state in the cited work, incessantly reconnects individuals to society by inscribing them in a community of belonging (Leray & Hamey-Warou, 2014, p 17). But, whether with one name or another, depending on their application contexts and objectives, the biographical workshops are, in our context, research models initially developed in the area of adult training as the current on life histories in education have been developing since the end of the 1980s (authors such as Dominicé, Josso, Pineau). And it is precisely because the use of biographical and autobiographical writing involves a formative dimension that the workshops are so relevant for those who – also in the social sciences and not only in education – seek a theoretical-practical coherence between the values of social justice, cognitive justice, and effectively respectful social practices among different individuals. We can also add that the adaptation of the model and spirit of *arbre a palabre* in our research and training activities, performs a counter-hegemonic articulation between traditionally different

³ JM Rugira (Research-training seminar 'Orality and dialogical practices and biographical approaches in adult education'), University of Paris 8, June 2004.

and distant knowledges, consubstantiating in itself an intercultural dialogue (Lechner, 2015), with possible intergenerational effects as well (Lechner, Capinha, Keating, 2020).

In a previous article we already had the opportunity to present the protocol of this biographical workshops that we carry out in our research and training practice (Lechner, 2012). With view to the practice of a concrete social hermeneutics (Michel, 2016) among the populations with whom we work (especially emigrants, immigrants and refugees), these workshops sought to bring to the heart of culturally very diverse groups an exercise of self-expression that enhances some empowerment – in the sense analyzed by Martha Nussbaum (2012), as a new power of action -, and reciprocal learning between participants with different migration histories. Each workshop is based on an operating structure that can be replicated in each group and session, with clearly defined stages that should allow the production of individual narrative accounts by each participant, attentive listening to everyone, the resonances, and a final sum-up. Each and every workshop obeys to a verbal 'contract' that must be accepted by all participants wanting to join the group. According to this contract, everyone must always prepare in advance the autobiographical texts to be read in the group (participants are never only observers), it is expected that they respect each other and do not turn the exchange of ideas and visions into any battlefield or a more or less audible competition. One of the specific objectives of the workshops is precisely to create a welcoming and dialoguing environment, as in the psychosocial practices developed by Jeanne-Marie Rugira (2016).

The workshop protocol is based on taking the floor and listening attentively to each and every one of the participants, followed by the echoes/resonances, that is, comments from those who heard the narratives (what they felt, thought, reminded, etc.). This moment of verbalization after listening is as important as the moments of narration and reading of the autobiographical texts, since it brings diversity to the group in the very act of listening, and not only in narration. It allows knowing and recognizing the positionality of each listening and starting to design a group identity, as a community listening to itself and its concrete social, political, historical problems. In this way, the diversity produced in the workshops resides not only in the various biographical accounts, styles and forms of self-writing, but also in the comments always offered by each listener to each narrator. As in the *arbre à palabres*, each participant brings to the group their perspective, positionality, listening, sensitivity, cultural, linguistic and symbolic references, unique experience and writing. We carry out a vigilant exercise of judgment suspension in situ (moral, political, etc.), to be replaced by the differential echo of each narrator during the resonances, always in a posture of adaptability and dialogue. It is, for this very reason, an ever-renewed exercise that does not intend to be a behavioural prescription, but to practice a situational listening and permeable word to others. Clearly, this is a real communication challenge.

The biographical workshops are carried out in a circular format of communication, sitting in a circle when working in presence, or following a round of testimonies if the workshop is carried out online. The circles begin with a brief presentation of all

participants, and then go on to share the autobiographical accounts. Reports can only be oral if some elements do not know how to write. But, in this text, we specifically deal with the workshops held around the production of written texts as self-writing also imply a formative character. Autobiographical writing is a training practice understood in a broad and existentialist sense, different from institutionalized formal knowledge (Pineau & Michelle, 1983; Honoré, 2016), and it is a technology of the Self known and practiced since the classic antiquity (Foucault, 1988). Given the specific theme of each workshop, all participants produce a one-page text to be read aloud in the group in each session. The size of the group should be decided according to the time available for the work, knowing from experience that six participants occupy three hours of workshop for each round of texts. That is, if there are 12 participants, a six-hour workshop will have to be organized so that everyone has time to share their text, reading it aloud, as well as having time to receive the resonances of the other participants.

Originally, the biographical workshops or biographical ateliers in Europe were conceived and implemented in the early 1980s onwards by the Swiss team of Pierre Dominicé (1982) and Marie-Christine Josso (1991) in the Applied Research Group on Adult Training of the Department of Education, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FAPSE) at the University of Genève. At the same time, the French group of the *Association Nationale pour la formation professionnelle des adultes* (AFPA), led by Bernadette Courtois, developed an interest and practice in experiential training and biographical work, namely in the context of the adaption to professional working contexts and training throughout life⁴, and in the field of adult training.

This French-speaking group in France, Switzerland and also in Belgium with Guy de Villers, dedicated itself to issues of self-training and education, having jointly thought about the institutional, professional and personal dimensions of lifelong learning. In 1998, Courtois and Prévost published the book 'Autonomie et formation au cours de la vie' (Courtois & Prévost, 1998), centered precisely on the development of a pedagogical and civic culture of experiential training interested in permanent education drawing from biographical experiences and narratives. Gaston Pineau was part of this group from the beginning, having published with Bernadette Courtois seminal works on adult experiential training (Courtois & Pineau, 1991) and co-creating the Association des Histoires de Vie en Formation (ASIHVIF) in 1991. Courtois – who forged the concept of project-autobiography, with her colleague Guy Bonvalot-, focused on the formative effect of autobiographical work and its impact on life projects. Indeed, the 'autobiography-project' allows subjects to get in touch with their skills regardless of their prestige or social status. It also makes it possible to retrace the life paths through different structures, communities of belonging, groups and sociability networks, highlighting the social dimension of life trajectories and becoming aware of the social meaning and collective relevance of biographical experiences (Bonvalot & Courtois, 1984). This focus on the autobiography-project – which translates into life projects born

4 See note by Hervé Prévost and Gaston Pineau on the ASIHVIF website « Bernadette Courtois (1941 – 2022), une femme de combats pour la formation professionnelle et existentielle des adultes tout au long de la vie », www.asihvif.com

from revisited experiential training – differs from another term that is of particular interest to sociology, the 'course of life' or *lebenslauf* (Kohli, 1978). Here the objective is programmatic and analyzes the bio-temporal system of socially defined sequences of lived events. The sociology of lifecourse focuses on objective data, while autobiographical work translates into a subjective action of experiences and actions (Alheit & Dausien, 1990). In this way, what matters in biographical work, understood as being formative, is above all the process of refining experiences, sharing experiences, and consequent co-construction of useful knowledge for the community and for the narrators themselves. In the presentation of its ethics and conception of training, the association of life histories in education makes it very clear how the works developed in the interface of biography and training are located in the field of anthro-po-training, serving to support and develop the contribution of life stories in the field of training and education. And it is important to note how this conception and practice of research and training shows how life stories and autobiographical accounts allow questioning collective and institutional aspects of regulation and official conceptions of citizenship and identities. The specific contribution of this anthro-formative articulation is made explicit on the same association for life histories in education (ASIHVIF) website: the biographical work involves the subjects with whom the research is carried out in the construction of new knowledge, and associates practitioners and researchers in order to articulate theoretical knowledge, with experiential and existential knowledge.

The legacies of this necessarily interdisciplinary work, in the Western context, can be found in Dilthey's sciences of the spirit, in Dewey's perspective on education and experience, in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, as well as in Sartre's existentialism and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. But it is equally important for the definition and anchoring of anthro-formative biographical research to acknowledge the so-called 'biographical turn' in the social and human sciences. These disciplines began to follow, in their analytical and conceptual perspectives, the subjective experiences of the subjects. The concepts of experience, self-formation, biographical transition, popular education, social transformation, mobility, following the historical and sociological changes happening in the relations between the individuals and society, leading to a development of biographical research in the 20th century. Given this new social context, the project of biographical research is to understand, according to Martucelli (2002), 'how individuals become individuals'. This is a vast and complex program, clearly, which challenges us to resort to biographical workshops to study the biographical trajectories of specific subjects, but also to exercise a more coherent form of research and training, between the values of the democratization of production of knowledge and the study of cultural diversity among different subjects.

The cultural, linguistic and narrative shift that took place in the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s made it possible to deepen biographical studies in this sense of valuing subjectivity and the meanings attributed by subjects to their experiences. This movement led not only to a validation of cultural expressions of individual and group identities, but also the academic legitimation of their political and civic dimension. There was a secularization of the manifestations of the "self" and the "we" in the public space, which transformed the technologies of the self and self-

reflection into a cultural manifestation of our era (Porter, 2000, p. 278, apud Roberts, 2002). The result of this cultural shift in the social sciences was the emphasis placed on issues of language and representation (ideographic logic), the analysis of 'texts', understood in the broadest sense, and the use of 'discourse'. The investigation processes associated with these analyses, consequently, started to include narrative analysis, discourse analysis, unpredictability (a phenomenological posture), joint analysis of meanings, action research attentive to adaptations, intersections, meetings and disagreements of perceptions in social life, and narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1988). The shadowed voices and versions of European history came to light as new world experiences. The silences and traumas of the subjugated men and women of hegemonic history could be therefore seen at the local scale [see, for example, the work of Veena Das on women in India (Das, 2000), or the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) "Provincializing Europe", on colonial thought and historical difference]. Culture, history and world politics are dimensions of biographical and narrative work, always implying the need to maintain methodological vigilance to different subject positions on the ground, to asymmetrical reciprocities in research and training work, to the possible or impossible co-construction of knowledge. Another necessary vigilance must be exercised over the function chosen for each biographical study. In fact, only by having a clear analytical objective can the spectacularization of the revealed intimacy be avoided. And once the purpose of each biographical study is clear, its articulation with the social and collective dimension of the personal data analyzed is also crystal clear.

| Autobiographical writing and training in/for the collective

This text proposes to analyze the formative dimension of biographical workshops through the use of autobiographical writing in particular. If in the vast array of workshops that we run in research and training contexts⁵ we do not always resort to the production of texts by the participants (when they cannot write), during the pandemic we have mainly carried out experiential training workshops based on the autobiographical writing of the online participants⁶. Perhaps not by chance, all those enrolled in these online workshops were women. The initiative started from the idea of thinking about the pandemic together, proposing thematic workshops on the private experiences of potential participants in this new normal imposed by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 on a planetary scale. We have started in January 2022 with the participation of mainly colleagues and students from the university milieu in Portugal, Brazil, Angola, as well as Portuguese native speakers residing in Germany and the United Kingdom. Each workshop lasted a month, making four weekly sessions of about 3 hours per zoom. This is the time needed for 6 participants to read their own texts and comment on those of their colleagues in the resonances phase requested after each reading. Thus, at each weekly meeting, six autobiographical texts written specifically for each session were read and

5 We also have long experience promoting conversation circles with children and young people in school contexts, within the scope of the outreach activity 'We and the others: Workshops on alterity and recognition', <https://www.ces.uc.pt/extensao/cesvaiaescola>). Since 2016.

6 Experiential Training Workshops, www.quintadosgirassoisfz.com/Eventos 2021, 2022.

commented on. During each of these workshops (the first was effectively dedicated to the theme of the pandemic, but as some of the participants wanted to continue they have further proposed new themes that were worked on in February, March and April), 6x4 texts were produced by the group. That is, each of the six participants wrote four texts, one per week, focusing on a specific aspect highlighted by the group effect. The central themes were: in January – the pandemic; February – confidence; in March – freedom; in April – fear. Thus, we have gathered several dozen autobiographical texts written by the participants of these workshops, over the weeks that each workshop has lasted.

We have asked each participant to make a final reflection on the experience of participating in the workshops and an analysis about the potential of the workshops. As a result, we have received texts from all participants, with undoubtable heuristic and sociological value. We want to publicly thank everyone for their generosity and dedication to the work carried out and later reported in such testimonials. Adapting these testimonies to the format of this scientific article, there is a selection of some of its parts in order to articulate the concrete effects described with the theoretical and methodological issues highlighted above. According to the analytical proposal of this article, the workshop participants' experience reports are more than 'results', not least because the workshops were held in this specific case as experiential training courses and not as a research project. Therefore, the testimonies of the participants are understood here as a practical exercise of subjectivation and intersubjectivation, in the sense of the Sartrean hypothesis according to which "The individual is the result of a story of which he seeks to become the subject." (Sartre, 1952, p. 63). From the side of clinical sociology, in turn, the subjectivity and speech of the subjects, is "a blessing, not a curse (...). Hence the interest of the biographical method and of implication in research groups (...)" (De Gaulejac, 2016, p. 11). A truly collaborative vision of biographical work does not exclude the testimonies of the participants, nor does it make an extractive use of these 'data'. It integrates them into a broader reflection as has always been our intention.

The reflections of the participants highlight the individual, group and collective effects of the biographical workshops, simultaneously. Out of respect for the authors of the testimonies, we analyze excerpts here in the order in which the texts arrived in our mailbox. We do it by theme in a systematic way, identifying the theoretical issues on the agenda. Three major themes are here highlighted by the participants in relation to such effects: alterity in action in the workshops, autobiographical writing and heterobiographical listening.

The concrete and situational experience of alterity and its effects on the sense of belonging and hospitality are identified by several workshop participants. Maria Jorge Ferro does so when referring to the experience of displacing herself, which allowed her to reflect on herself in a different way and feeling a vital acceptance by the group:

[...] Participating in the Workshops (...) was a concrete possibility of moving away from myself to take the place of "the other" beyond or outside myself, at the same time that I was invited to write to myself, to reflect on who I am, due to my own training and professional practice, these were sessions where the

experience of listening to myself reflected in the voices of fellow participants, returned a sense of embracement that every person, every human being needs to be and develop. (...) It was especially comforting because it almost guaranteed the collective humanity we had (we have!) to rekindle. (Maria Jorge Ferro, University Professor, Coimbra, Portugal, June 16, 2022)

For her part, Cibele Fabichak talks about respect, diversity and the reverberations of the exercises carried out even after the workshop:

It is surprising, as the exercise of exchange, reflection, respect and sincere multicultural sharing between speeches and listening begin to reverberate beyond the end of the biographical workshop. I found that one of the most striking, beneficial and disquieting "side effects" is that the echo of the narratives continues to impact me (to the extent of everyday life) and to show me that although each life story is unique, it carries countless points of connection, affinity and congruence beyond time and space." (Cibele Fabichak, Physician and historian, São Paulo, Brazil, June 17, 2022)

Marianne Kolb underlines the solidarity, companionship and well-being provided by the workshop:

Taking part in these workshops is experiencing sensitive listening, exercising generous and solidary feelings, allowing the miracle of feeling welcome and accepted in the group. It's experiencing the snuggle of the circle and the warmth of our pain. It makes us grow and helps us overcome a feeling of loneliness that we carry with us throughout our lives. (Marianne Kolb, PhD student in Education, Heidelberg, June 18, 2022)

Rosa Melo, in this regard, mentions the edifying power of the experience of exchanging narratives and resonances:

Knowing that someone from so close and, at the same time, from so far away is there, listening, navigating and looking for meaning in every word spoken or phrase built with the timbre of my voice and the brushstrokes of my art; hearing the impact of the words revealed or the moments described and situations brought up, in the most diverse styles, and, above all, the new meanings given to this by each of the participants, is impressive. (Rosa Melo, Senior Researcher, Luanda/London, June 19, 2022)

Karlla Araújo underscores the effect of immediate and deferred co-construction over the four monthly sessions of the workshop, as well as its humanizing character:

At the beginning, I was looking for a formative experience in the academic field, looking to deepen a research method in the field of biography and (auto)biography. But I was soon confronted with the humanizing dimension of the workshops as a spiral that made me lose sight of myself and blend in with life stories that get confused, elide and erupt into other narratives, different from the initial ones. (Karlla Araújo, University Professor, Natal, June 20, 2022)

The youngest participant also mentions the collective effect of the workshop experience. Maria Jose Costa says:

[...] The interest and participation in the workshops at an early stage was anchored in learning the methodology through experience. It soon became a process of profound relationship with the experiences of the collective, thus becoming a space/time that transcended learning the method, assuming it as

experiential and transformative. (Maria José Costa, Master's student in Social and Cultural Psychiatry, Coimbra, June 21, 2022)

This experiential and transforming dimension, it should be noted, is the one that most evidently adds the civic and social-participatory level to the training and research method of the biographical workshops. Hence the fact that the analysis provided by the workshops as a training or research method always require a meta-analysis of its transforming effects in micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (social) scales.

The participant who attended the most workshops throughout this 2022 online series, via zoom, was Maria Clara Melo who shows in her testimony how the collective effect here under analysis is, also in the meta-analysis, a group movement of getting awareness growth in/of the biographical action:

This workshop offered us very beautiful moments of authenticity, confidence in which we were weaving threads together and polyphonic complicity. Unveiling, “unveiling” the stories of unknown people, in different geographies, different professions that have become close, accomplices and friends, was the most precious fruit I have harvested in these recent cloudy times. (Maria Clara Melo, Professor and Master in Perceptual Psychopedagogy, Carcavelos, June 21, 2022)

Developing the same idea, Clara Moura Lourenço also associates this authentic and trusting polyphony with the exercise of a democratic way of dialogue and coexistence:

The individual reflection, in writing, requested from each of the participants, as a preliminary point for the work sessions, was simultaneously an element of motivation for attentive listening to the person of the other and an active principle in the constitution of an affective web that was becoming denser, from one session to another, making each participant feel more and more an integral part of a community, which testimony and the resonances it provoked in the other participants helped to build. Being part of something presupposes participation on equal terms and hence the importance of the method systematically exchanging the roles of those who give and those who receive, insofar as each participant is truly an interlocutor, assuming sometimes the role of speaker, sometimes the role of receiver, that is, being a real player in the discourse, with the right to speak and to listen attentively to others, to recognition. The biographical workshops are, in this way, a democratic method of speaking that allows achieving a true dialogue based on attention to oneself and others in the ever-renewed exercise of respect. (Clara Moura Lourenço, retired teacher and photographer, Coimbra, June 25, 2022)

This dialogue effect seems particularly relevant when we think that the experience of the pandemic has isolated us on a global and glocal scale, causing people and communities to experience each other in a new way in their daily lives. This form revealed the need for greater democracy in interpersonal relationships, acceptance of differences and recognition. One of the other facets of this welcoming experience in the workshops is mentioned by Ana Botelho, a participant who did not know most of the group members from the start:

Right in the first session, without realizing it, I trusted, I created an empathy with everyone. When listening to the confinement reports, the emotions were

many, only, in fact, only the theme was the same, the experiences so different, the same experience. The pandemic was present in us. Why doubt about what you heard? (Ana Botelho, photographer, Coimbra, June 28, 2022)

This spontaneous confidence is one of the relevant effects of the workshops which, as a method and in their theoretical assumptions, really bring people and different worlds together, in respect, in attentive listening, in trust.

With regard to the issue of autobiographical writing – the second theme highlighted in our analysis of the participants' testimonies -, the reflections also denote an individual and collective awareness of its effects:

Autobiographical writing, especially when working in the academic environment, is, in the format required by the Workshops, another adventure: it is recounting ourselves. It is to recognize the space to be listened to and questioned as a person. It is demanding and rewarding at the same time. Writing based on personal impressions is giving voice to words that, in academic writing at best, can only be intuited, but in no way make them stand out. For these sessions, and in times of physical distance from other people, from all people, as a way of life or a need to guarantee the minimization of health risks, it was especially comforting because it almost guaranteed the collective humanity that we had (we have!) to do reignite.” (Maria Jorge Ferro, University Professor, Coimbra, Portugal, June 16, 2022)

Marianne Kolb also mentions the sharing of intimacy in this double individual and collective sense:

Sharing our writing in the circle of these workshops is sharing what is deepest in us. It is having the experience of perceiving ourselves as fragile and vulnerable. However, and almost at the same time, we experience the certainty that, with each sharing and with each listening experience, sincere and profound resonances coming from other sunflowers will echo, making it possible, in this way, to reflect and reframe our life experiences, in order to bring the sun and hope in a more humane world, closer to our hearts. (Marianne Kolb, PhD student in Education, Heidelberg, June 18, 2022)

Rosa Melo mentions the same solidarity effect, connoting it with the formation of affective bonds among the participants:

(...) More than the autobiographical writing, the resonances; one and the other complete, stimulate and enrich one another. All that aside, in the circle of resonances, entities intersect, new ties are sewn, and why not, a new family is formed; something therapeutic; everything we need in times of a pandemic! (Rosa Melo, Senior Researcher, Luanda/London, June 19, 2022)

Such sensitive and welcoming listening is understood by Karlla Araújo as an approval with a collective meaning:

It wasn't applause we craved, just confirmation that everything human is possible to touch another human soul. The change of conceptual perspective from one text to another, from one resonance to another, makes the potential of this instrument of scientific work evident. (Karlla Araújo, University Professor, Natal, June 20, 2022)

It is important to underline this composite characteristic of work in a biographical workshop that simultaneously presents its potential for research and a good

working environment. It is not because it allows a good environment resulting from the implicit socialization of power in the group, that biographical workshops cease to be scientific. On the contrary, in themselves they represent a paradigm shift that incorporates the subjective dimensions of research work into the knowledge production process itself, as already identified in qualitative research in the social sciences (Denzin, 2009). Maria José Costa sees in this intersubjective movement an interpersonal reception that places the body at the centre of the sharing experience:

Spiral listening, that is, self-listening (oral sharing of writing), listening through the workshop collective (oral and individual sharing of resonances) and framing or a new resonance about oneself, about the(s) experience(s) or ones writing, which may not end there. The task of listening to each participant in this collective makes him/her feel safe, reliable and affectionate in each workshop. This is the noble task of the participant. The welcoming listening of every word, silence or expression on the screen. The task of listening to the other and the collective is in itself a dense experience. It is, therefore, the experience of and in the body that allows welcoming the other, human being, similar (becoming increasingly human, in this approximation and recognition of the humanity that unites them), based on integrity, affection and devolution and /or resonate genuine and benign. Participating in the workshops in February and April 2022 allowed me to understand and continue to believe in the power of listening in the collective, which can start with writing that surprises and goes on to rebuild experiences or new dreams/paths in a spiral of rewarding sharing. (Maria José Costa, Master's student in Social and Cultural Psychiatry, Coimbra, June 21, 2022)

Maria Clara Melo also gives special emphasis to this listening, as a special experience that is needed in society:

[...] However, the aspects that challenged me the most were: feeling listened to and welcomed by the colleagues in this workshop. In the feedback offered, I embarked on a broader and deeper journey like Alice in Wonderland, that shrinks to deepen and expands to know. Listening to the companions' texts also contained this magic, like a mirror game reflecting different experiences, but in which we were all included, each one from a different angle. This workshop offered us very beautiful moments of authenticity, confidence in which we were weaving together threads and polyphonic complicity. Unveiling, "unveiling" the stories of unknown people, in different geographies, different professions that have become close, accomplices and friends, was the most precious fruit I have harvested in these recent cloudy times. (Maria Clara Melo, Professor and Master in Perceptual Psychopedagogy, Carcavelos, June 21, 2022)

Clara Moura Lourenço, in the same vein, reflects on attentive listening as a right and recognition:

(...) with the right to speak and to listen attentively to others, to recognition. The biographical workshops are, in this way, a democratic method of speaking that allows to achieve a true dialogue based on attention to oneself and others in the ever-renewed exercise of respect. (Clara Moura Lourenço, retired teacher and photographer, Coimbra, June 25, 2022)

Ana Botelho underlines the atmosphere of trust in an unknown and diverse group:

Right in the first session, without realizing it, I trusted, I created an empathy with everyone. When listening to the confinement reports, the emotions were many, only, in fact, only the theme was the same, the experiences so different, the same experience. The pandemic was present in us. Why doubt what you heard? [...] How good it is for me to meet this group of women in such different places and experiences, I must confess that I thought of each one of you several times, in your texts with your faces. I came to see you on Facebook. I gained a lot from being here. I was able to talk about myself, expose my feelings, something I rarely do. [...] Thank you all for your comments on my texts. (Ana Botelho, photographer, Coimbra, June 28th, 2022)

As seen, the participants in these workshops simultaneously referred to the individual and group or collective effects of this experience, and qualify it as being 'humanizing', 'rewarding', 'transforming', 'creative', 'profound'. We underline the importance found in the kind of listening that is experienced in these circles, as listening to oneself, as sensitive, self-listening, listening to other colleagues and the group. A 'spiral listening' that builds bridges between different people, physically distant, but who thus find union, complicity, bonds, sincere sharing, trust, mutual respect, tolerance, resonance, multicultural sharing, freedom to open up, solidarity, depth, hope, friendship. These are all words written by the participants of the online workshops, women who also experienced in the space-time of the meetings a practical form of collective humanity, of aggregation, which embodies a significant alterity, which transforms and gives back to the group and to each one, their dense life experiences thus resignified and made known.

| Collective reach of the autobiographical work

We can group the potential of biographical research into three main domains, adopting a classification proposed by Gaston Pineau in the late 1990s, which refers to its formative, transforming and social action effects (Pineau, 1996). We believe it is fundamental to contextualize the formative dimension of the biographical work in these other dimensions of transformation and action.

Biographical research produces formative effects, first of all, by putting social subjects in contact. Subjects who, from the outset, could be unlikely encounters. It also establishes this contact based on an interest in someone's life, in their stories and experiences, an interest that translates into an attentive and respectful listening to biographical narratives, as they are produced and without judgments. Very often, such listening allows subjects an enunciation about themselves and their lives which is truly inaugural. This fact is very relevant for ordinary people who do not usually value their experiences, nor trust their language or communication skills. In addition, the enunciation allows for the production of meanings that reframe the narrated experiences, helping to dialogue with the other, to expression of a voice that is almost always inaudible and absent from the public space. In the context of the research projects we carried out with migrants and refugees (Portuguese emigrants, immigrants in Portugal and refugees), this formative dimension of research with and about their life trajectories was notorious, namely in the awareness of their rights, of institutionalized injustices, racism and discrimination that affect their daily lives and the horizon for the future.

At a group and even community level, on the other hand, this biographical work is also formative through the construction of shared meanings about a common history of migration, even if the itineraries and conditions of these migrations were different. The groups can even be very heterogeneous, as was the case with the groups of immigrants in Portugal that we brought together in a project financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology, already mentioned (Lechner, 2015), with people from twelve different countries, participants in biographical workshops then carried out. By producing oral and written reports about their migration experiences in the group, everyone was able to hear the stories of each one, thus learning about the broader picture of migration in the world, immigration in Portugal, and their living conditions in the city of Coimbra (specifically in this case). They learned about rights, about history, geography, culture, languages, different religions, during the biographical workshops. But more than new content and information learned, the group work itself in the workshops and story circles allows to experience participating in a true citizenship forum. This can be understood as a 'community of inquiry or questioning' (Shields, 2003; Scott-Bauman, 2010), or as a family of practical affinities, which greatly reinforce the feeling of participation and social recognition, so important for groups and people who may feel marginalized, or ostracized and discriminated against because of their social status, legal status, ethnic group, religion and culture. Therefore, the formative dimension of biographical research has not only an individual but also a collective extent, and can also contribute to recommendations for public policies and institutions with decision-making power over the lives of migrants and refugees (in the case of these specific projects). Depending on the specific methodological instruments used in each biographical research (for example, autobiographical writing, photo elicitation, improvised theatrical performances based on life stories, experience reports, etc.), new skills are also learned, since acceptance of the terms of participation in biographical research creates conditions for the possibility of expressing those same skills (writing, performance, image interpretation, etc.).

With regard to the transforming effects of biographical research, these are also observable at different individual, group and social scales. The potential for change that narrative production offers to the understanding of narrated stories is well known (Chaput et al., 1995). The weaving of an oral or written narrative transforms, in effect, the frameworks and meanings attributed to life experiences from the outset. The translation of experiences into words promotes an effect that has been well studied, for example, by linguistics, psychoanalysis and clinical narrative. And the very choice of words used, the exercise of resorting to the materiality of languages and languages, also impacts on the perceptions and awareness of the themes addressed, both for those who narrate and for those who listen or read. It is not only, of course, mere communication or information exchanges. These are narratives of experiences that shape a vivid body to the words used. Therefore, they also touch – in one way or another – the human and sensitive fiber of the narrators of the story told.

In addition to the power of words and narrative production (which have many other relevant dimensions to be analyzed with more time), the fact that in biographical research potentially anyone can produce such narratives, is also transformative.

This possibility represents a certain empowerment of ordinary citizens and a kind of insurgent citizenship necessary for the health of democracies. Of course, there are conditions of narrative possibility and impossibility (historical, sociological, cultural, etc.), but potentially the narrative production of a life story can illustrate, inform and help to understand, for example, a given historical period or social movement. A good example is the impressive report published in Portuguese by a young Iraqi refugee “From Mosul to Alfeizerão in 6000 words” (Al Anazy, 2016) who – with the help of a Portuguese teacher-, wrote his story of surviving the shipwreck that occurred during the crossing of the Aegean Sea, on October 28, 2015. They write in the prologue: “Writing a story is always a difficult exercise. Writing a story that is ours is even harder. When it's done four-hand, with the language barrier trying to stop the process, it seems like an impossible task. But, there are only impossibles if we don't knock them down. There is always a passage to reach the other, to let the other reach us. We can only meet in alterity. Only then can we understand and accept each other. Life unfolds, fully in limit situations. That's where we find, or not, our humanity. This story is intended to be a story that could be told by any of us, in different circumstances, times and places. Our only wish is that it makes you stop and think for a moment. All of us are, most of the time, a dice thrown by luck. We do not intend to give a gratuitous exposition of intimacy, but to give a testimony of what a life can be different from the ones we normally live. [...]” (Al Anazy, 2016, p. 7). And, in the epilogue, “[...] The reality of hosting refugees in Portugal needs to be approached with care, detail and great precision so that it can give us the most accurate picture possible of what we do, or don't do, in this context. host. So let's leave this part of the story for later [...]” (Al Anazy, 2016, p. 79).

Another paradigmatic example that helps us analyze the transformative potential of autobiographical accounts is the book by Behrouz Boochani (2018) “No friend but the mountains”, written in Farsi via a mobile phone from the prison on Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea. Boochani writes about his experience of imprisonment by the Australian government. But, as we know, this is a reality experienced by many migrants, displaced persons and refugees of our era. It is not a unique story, much less rare, despite being absolutely exceptional in its atrocity and inhumanity. Boochani was able to produce this narrative under extreme conditions, in danger of death if caught, but he did it anyway. His book is a voice of testimony, an act of survival. A poetic account. A scream of resistance. A vivid portrait of five years of incarceration and loneliness. Writing this book was a liberation for Behrouz, even if behind four walls. An exercise of freedom in a condition of deprivation of liberty. Of injustice. For the author it served as a salvation, but for his readers it served a public, political and ethical cause.

Writing is certainly a skill that many people may not feel they have. And self-writing is also a cultural expression with very different uses and meanings depending on contexts and subjects. In addition to being a competence, show Fabre et al. (2010), it takes an ‘authority’ to be able to write and make one's own story known. Therefore, when referring to the transformative potential of biographical narratives, we are not forgetting these great social inequalities between different people. But once someone accepts the challenge to participate in a research about and with narratives, we can see how this is a platform for the production, expression and

analysis of the various analytical dimensions of the biographical (macro, meso and micro). This is what happened in our biographical workshops with Portuguese emigrants in several countries, in which, by agreeing to produce reports about their lives and experiences, they allowed us to jointly produce knowledge about Portuguese emigration (France, USA, Brazil) and to be an active part of this same production. Biographical research does not take its interlocutors as 'professional informants' or study guinea pigs, but as part of the research process. This participation is, in itself, one of the transformations brought about by the creation of mixed working groups that bring together different social subjects who are almost always distant in everyday life. There is still an important nuance to be mentioned in what regards the transforming effects of biographical research, which is the fact that the narrative exercise on a given theme leads the writer to changes about him/herself. We can say that it is not only writing that transforms, but also the effect of the group and the attention paid to the events around us.

Producing experience narratives, working in workshops and story circles, implementing participatory and biographical methodologies, creates new ingredients for a critical pedagogy and civic participation. So, it is far from being a dilettante and apparently sterile attitude centered on egos, but rather to be close to and constitute a collective action improving the conditions of social life as a whole. For the knowledge produced through these methods and actions to have an even greater constructive impact on societies, it is necessary to bring together different people, groups, institutions that are not only interested in others different from themselves, but also in the experience of looking at themselves as another. That is, to incorporate the relationship of alterity into a new way of inhabiting life and the planet. Autobiographical writing and listening to biographical reports are golden keys to this effect.


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Resumo

O texto debruça-se sobre as oficinas biográficas como espaços e momentos de formação experiencial com relevância coletiva. Baseamo-nos na experiência de dinamização de oficinas com grupos muito diversos em contextos de pesquisa e de formação, nas quais os participantes produzem textos autobiográficos temáticos a serem partilhados em grupo. Apresentamos o protocolo destas oficinas, seus pressupostos teóricos, processo metodológico e resultados, em linha com a corrente das histórias de vida em formação, e no horizonte de uma análise social crítica consciente da relevância cívica e política das experiências privadas de pessoas comuns em grupos de trabalho colaborativo e individualmente.

Palavras-chave: Métodos biográficos. Narrativas coletivas. Pesquisa-Formação. Pesquisa-Ação.

Resumen

El texto se centra en los talleres biográficos como espacios y momentos de formación vivencial con pertinencia colectiva. Nos basamos en nuestra experiencia de promoción de talleres con grupos muy diversos en contextos de investigación y formación, en los que los participantes elaboran textos autobiográficos para ser compartidos en grupos. Presentamos el protocolo de estos talleres, sus presupuestos teóricos, proceso metodológico y resultados, en consonancia con la corriente de relatos de vida en formación, y en el horizonte de un análisis social

crítico consciente de la relevancia cívica y política de las experiencias privadas en grupos de trabajo colaborativo e individual.

Palabras clave: Métodos biográficos. Narrativas colectivas. Investigación-Formación. Investigación-Acción.

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