



Playback Theatre, Life History and Biographical Research

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Since its beginnings in 1975, Playback Theatre has developed new potentialities as *action method* for public intervention and social change. The fact that this approach has spread so fast around the world is an expression of its appropriateness to our times and its methodological properties in the prevailing social discourse. The method provides dynamic investigation through symbolic interaction with individuals and groups. It encourages dialogue by building connection between people and it affirms their role as co-determining subjects of their own life and lived stories.

Life history has been given many meanings in several scientific fields. It can refer to a variety of methods used for conducting qualitative narrative interviews. Biographical research has advanced from the periphery to the centre of scientific adult education from the 'biographic turn' since the 1970s – which refers back to the Chicago School of sociology of the 1920s – to new educational debate about life paths, biography and lifelong learning. Some approaches to lifelong learning are conceptually close to the idea of reflexivity, which has become a central preoccupation of mainstream social science. The consciousness of one's own biography and developing reflexivity as act of historicity (concept of 'biographicity', Alheit 2007) is considered by some sociologists to be "a survival necessity in a more individualised, perpetually changing, paradoxical risk inducing culture" (West et al., 2007). Using biographical and life history approaches in the study of adult and lifelong learning opens up new perspectives in the development of Europe in a globalised world.

Playback Theatre as an oral form of *Story Telling* has similarities with *Life Story Approaches* and it bears potentialities for reflexivity and *participatory action research* especially in social and education fields: in the interdisciplinary study of *lifelong learning* processes defined as a *biographical approach to life history*.

The playback specific form is a qualitative setting for hearing and understanding life stories in a process of reflexivity by dialectic restitution. The process allows the creation of a privileged space, a place of narration to tell one's own story and see it in relation to those of others. Using an aesthetic mediation catalyses the process of putting personal experience into social context. The Playback Theatre approach offers a frame for telling personal life stories so as to talk to each other and see one another in a transitive way: a theatre where human beings become *social actors*, both agent and subject of their *stories* as collective *life histories*.

The dialectic of the narrative process has been described by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1990): Encountering *Self* as *an Other* and discovering *Oneself as Another*. Connecting life stories opens up to identity building through *narrative identity*. In the Playback Theatre process, the playing out of life stories has further the qualities of dynamic anthropology, social investigation and intervention, understood as cross cultural hermeneutic phenomenology. It is a process whereby the underlying political and social dimensions become apparent: one can develop the kinds of social bonds which take into account the singularities and self-expression of the individual, while at the same time acting as catalyst for a dynamic of mediation which focuses on reliance, relation building and synergy between, the Self and the Other, the individual and the society.

The purpose of my lecture is to revisit the practice and theory of Playback Theatre in relation to biographical and life history approaches to establishing dialogue between these fields.

A series of meaningful questions emerges:

What kinds of connections are to establish between Playback Theatre and academic fields?

What kinds of connections exist between Playback Theatre and biographical research?

What are biographical and life history approaches?

What could biographical research learn from the practice and theory of Playback Theatre?

What could Playback Theatre learn from the practice and theory of biographical research?

What kind of knowledge, research and practice do our societies need in a globalised world?

Life History and biographical research

Life history and biographical research as study of the *Human Condition* (Arendt) in modern societies through investigation of life and environment ("*lifeworld*", *Lebenswelt*) could be understood as “the interplay of learning across people’s lives - formal, informal and intimate – and how to make sense of this”, using interdisciplinary perspectives in diverse ways and settings. “It encompasses learning in the workplace, in families, communities, schools, colleges and universities, as well as in the professions, and in managing processes of migration and building new social movements” (West et al., 2007).

Today, life history and biographical research connect particularly with the following fields: Ethnography, Anthropology, History, Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology – Psychoanalysis, Sciences Education – Human Sciences, Language and Literature, Cultural Studies, Art & aesthetic Education.

Life history and biographical research is increasingly being implemented as human sciences, in social science and education departments in universities and international research networks. Alheit and Dausien (West et al., 2007: 57) point out that life history as a life long learning process is being seen in the emerging interdisciplinary fields in European adult education projects.

In order to understand this evolution better, I will focus on three main academic research networks in Europe (languages: German, English, French - other places and languages have not been taken into consideration):

- Networks in Germany
- European Networks (English-speaking)
- International Networks (French-speaking).

Biographical Research Networks in Europe

- Networks in Germany

Research networks are set up in the human sciences. Since the 1970s a large range of important publications have emerged. At the end of the 20th century, handbooks and other publications point to the importance of biographical research in scientific discourse (see Jüttemann & Thomae, 1999 – Krüger & Marotzki, 1999 – Hansen-Schaberg, 1997 - Dan Bar On, 1993 – Rosenthal, 1995 – Backe & Schulze, 1979 - and many other publications, such as Petzold, 2003).

Particular application in the fields of sociology and education has been seen, where interrelated networks have been developed (the research group set up in 1979 became, in 1986, a section called "*Biografieforschung*" - biographical research, of the *German Society for Sociology*). This network is closely connected to the *German Society of Science Education* (DGFE, founded in 1964). In this network, the Biography Research Group was first set up in 1978, and then in 1994, established as a permanent research group (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Erziehungswissenschaftliche Biographieforschung*), which in 1998 became part of Section 2 of the *German Society of Science Education*.

One of the initiators of biographical research in German sociological and educational fields is also the co-founder of ESREA: Peter Alheit, of the University of Göttingen, Department of Education, Section for Biography and Life Environmental Research.

- European Networks (English- speaking)

European Society for Research on The Education of Adults (ESREA)

ESREA, according to its own online description “promotes and disseminates theoretical and empirical research on the education of adults and adult learning in Europe through research networks, conferences and publications”. ESREA consists of several networks and it has 7 networks, with the *Life History and Biographical Research Network* being founded in 1991.

A prominent co-founder of ESREA, Linden West (Canterbury Christ Church University) is co-editor of an important publication about the current evolution of the life history and Biographical Research Network in Europe (See West et al., 2007).

- International Networks (French-speaking)

Association Internationale des Histoires de vie en formation (ASIHVIF).

The first meetings in 1980 took place in Montreal, Geneva and Paris. The international association was founded in 1990.

Prominent co-founders and researchers of ASIHVIF are: Gaston Pineau (University of Tours, France), Pierre Dominicé (University of Geneva, Switzerland), and Guy de Villers (University of Louvain, Belgium). The first international conference took place in 1986 at the University of Tours. Gaston Pineau also organised in 2007 the second world conference of French-speaking networks on Biography Research (with more than 420 participants and 116 lectures on Biography Research (See *Colloque International: le Biographique, La Réflexivité et les Temporalités*, Tours, 2007).

Approaches to Life History and their Development in National Contexts

In 2007, ESREA researchers published a very valuable overview of European developments:

*Using Biographical and Life History Approaches
in the Study of Adult and Lifelong learning: Perspectives from across Europe.*

The editors, Linden West, Barbara Merrill, Peter Alheit, Anders Siig Andersen, and other contributors provide some backgrounds to the emergence and use of biographical and of life history methodologies in specific countries and linguistic communities of the European Union.

They point out:

“Reference is made to the values that inform the biographical turn and life history turn, and to the philosophical and disciplinary influences at work. There is a concern with the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying research: about how the world, including research, works; about the nature of being through research. Life history and biography are not simply a set of technical procedures to be applied but contain a range of assumptions about human beings, the social world, the nature of knowledge, as well as values to do with what research is for and how we should engage with the ‘other’. It can be observed in passing, that the various traditions in the ‘family’ of life history and biographical approaches often tend, rhetorically, to relate their work to a range of historical and philosophical influences, including phenomenology, The Chicago School, Max Weber, The Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis or more recently feminism. We may note how the focus of research can vary: some researchers are more preoccupied with the totality of individual lives – as a basis for building case studies – and with engaging, in depth, with complex features of these lives or the narratives told about them” (West et al., 2007: 27).

The contributors of ESREA publication further point out that the focus is more deliberately on research and the use and potential of biographical and life history approaches in the “study” of adult and lifelong learning:

“A broad disciplinary range, while there is a significant endeavour to explore and map the borderlands of relevance *between* the disciplines, Critical theory, psychoanalysis, narrative and post-positivist perspectives – these and more are brought to bear at interdisciplinary interstices relevant to adult learning. Moreover biographies, in their complexities, tend to challenge, confound even, conventional academic boundaries. The impact of individual nations’ socio-culture, history and economics on research cultures, methodological approaches, including processes of data collection and their interpretation, are better understood as a result of the work of the ESREA Biography and Life History network” (West et al., 2007: 7).

As Linden West and others contributing to the opening and closing chapters have noted:

“approaches using the same names may be based on different epistemological and ontological premises – particularly with respect to the desirability and possibility of achieving objectivity and/or ways in which to incorporate subjectivity, including that of the researcher, reflexively and ethically, in the narrative”.

The Biographical Turn

The volume issued by ESREA researchers offers a pathway to knowledge, to probe “into a whole series of reflexive explorations: of what it means to research, to teach and to learn, to be a researcher and or a facilitator of learning, and in bringing the researcher and researched into a new relational dynamic through the inclusion of participants’ voices not only as narrative data but also as co-inquirers” (West et al., 2007: 27).

The editors point out important themes:

- In the human sciences, life history and biographical perspectives have been present, over a long period, in continental European streams. They became a ‘turn’ (with its connotation of a major movement) with the development of a range of methods for collecting ‘data’ in the form of (narrative) autobiographical interviews. The process was also facilitated by the growing influence of ‘interpretative/hermeneutic’ as well as more critical epistemologies. Symbolic interactionism derived from American sociology, has an important place in the hermeneutic project, as has the Frankfurt School in encouraging a focus on repressive social norms.
- The application of biographical methods in social science – the ‘biographical turn’ of the 1970s has partly to be understood as a reaction against forms of research which marginalised the perspectives of subjects themselves or reduced subjective processes, including learning, to overly abstract entities.
- If biography or life history has become a trend of our time, paradoxically it goes against the powerful contrary trends in mainstream educational research. Researchers are increasingly driven towards producing ‘useful’ information that will lead to direct improvement in standards of teaching and learning in schools and other educational institutions. In education, biographical research has combined with more humanistic ways of theorising learning and education, and pedagogical practices, focusing, for instance, on personal development and growth.
- A need for mindfulness comes into play, in both research and in the process of educating students to think about the connectedness of learning, formally and informally, intimately and in public spheres. Delicate but historically important professional and academic, public and private distinctions blur, extending the boundaries of practice and the margins of interdisciplinary and epistemological possibilities.
- Biographical research goes beyond global-regional-national-local boundaries as well as disciplines and professions, as a result of the local, personal and intimate impact of globalisation on individual life trajectories.
- The need to develop a wider sensitivity to such dynamics lies at the core of the project to nurture European perspectives.
- Achieving mainstream acceptance requires further work to link policy makers and researchers.

The Chicago School

The editors of ESREA publication described the seminal influence of The Chicago School for Biographical Research in the following general terms (West et al., 2007: 28):

- The Chicago School emerged around 1920 with the urban research of sociologists (Park and Burgess). The influence of Thomas, as well as Mead, in the development of the School was considerable.
- The Chicago sociologists were engaged in intensive field work: they studied immigrants or other groups in their own environment, using various methods of inquiry and obtained both quantitative and qualitative data. They preferred the case study as the most useful approach. An important way of building case studies was via participant observation. They utilised personal documents such as autobiographical writings.
- Thomas and Znaniecki had an important contribution through their comprehensive study: *"The Polish Peasant in Europe and America"* (1918-20). For the authors, personal documents provided the basis for theoretical exploration of what they defined as the disintegration process faced by immigrants. Their interest also encompassed the integration and reintegration of individuals and their families into new lives and cultures.
- Thomas and Znaniecki believed autobiography enabled researchers to get close to the prime characteristics of an individual life, and those of a group.
- Through autobiography, the sociologists could gain insight into an individual life's process and his/her interaction with others. A strong theoretical influence in Chicago School sociology was symbolic interactionism understood as regarding the members of society as actors (as social actors). The social order is created in, by and through interactions between the members of a society. Biographical and life history researchers tend to take it as axiomatic.
- Mention should also be made of the influences of *Oral History* in the development of life history and biographical approaches. Oral history emerged as part of a wider movement to give voice to those silenced by dominant perspectives. Oral historians have engaged in debates about the nature of memory and truth in oral accounts, the interplay of past and present as well as processes of interpretation (emphasising that written texts are always and inevitably interpretations of events rather than representing the events themselves, as do oral narratives).

The Chicago School represents the birth of American sociology. Researchers had to leave the academic environment to do field work in social contexts: they combined approaches of ethnology with sociology. It was the first step towards *Action-Research* with active participative observation.

Developments on Biography-Research in French-Speaking Networks

Biographical research in French-speaking contexts has three main references: sociology, psycho-sociology and adult education (West et al., 2007: 44).

French sociologists drew on a long heritage stemming from philosophers who gave space to notions of the 'self' (Delory-Momberger, 2000, 2005); another influence was the Chicago School and its modern developments. A third sociological influence emerged from the events of 1968, which have guided many sociologists to reconsider narratives as a valid scientific instrument. Daniel Bertaux (1976, 1997) remains a major reference in this approach.

French psycho-sociology streams which have been developed after 1968 have a stronger critical vision of society. Some French researchers focus on "institutional analysis" such as Lourau (1970) and Lapassade (1974) and in *Action-Research* (Barbier, 1977). In the search for new ways of increasing personal development practices and psycho-sociological investigation, a movement led by Vincent de Gaulejac emerged (1987, 1999).

The third stream of research using biographies in the French-speaking world relates, as stated, to adult education and learning processes. From 1980, first Gaston Pineau (Quebec, Canada/Tours, France), Pierre Dominicé (Geneva, Switzerland), Guy de Villers (Louvain, Belgium) developed common goals:

"Through their dialogue, respective life trajectories and fields of interest they created and lent solidity to a body of thought which has become a reference in the matter of life history in adult education. Stimulated by various currents in philosophy, psychology, sociology, they share a common concern for the democratic aspects of continuing education" (Ollagnier, in West et al., 2007: 45).

Through the main efforts of the three researchers, among other, a French-speaking network was established in 1990 (ASIHVIF - *International Association for Life History in Adult Education*). The Charter of the Association states:

"The purpose of the Association is to promote life history as a social approach in the area of continuing education. The members aim to develop it through their activities in research, education and training and through publications. Research is meant to clarify the practice of life history in the field of education and training. Education and training shall be based on the results of research" (West et al., 2007: 45).

West points further out:

Members of the Association agree on three basic principles with regard to life history's educational dimensions:

- hermeneutical (making sense of one's life),
- potentially emancipatory (the ability to position oneself amongst others),
- action-oriented (action planning).

One of the main intellectual references to French-speaking biographical research is Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), which combined phenomenological description with hermeneutic interpretation. The trilogy of *Time and Narrative* (1983, 1984, 1985) and *Oneself as Another* (1990) give the fundamentals to an approach of "*Narrative Identity*".

Ricoeur's aim is to reconstruct the mediations required in order to connect the question of narrative with that of time. The essence: Human time is the time of our life stories, considered either at an individual level or at a collective level as the history of our communities. As such, narratives preserve the memory of what deserved to be remembered. An individual or collective entity can be only identified through the act of Narrative: « Dire l'identité d'une communauté ou d'un individu, c'est répondre à la question: *qui* a fait telle action, *qui* en est l'agent, l'auteur? (...) La réponse ne peut être que narrative. Répondre à la question « qui ? », comme l'avait fortement dit Hannah Arendt, c'est raconter l'histoire d'une vie. L'histoire racontée dit le *qui* de l'action. *L'identité du qui n'est donc elle-même qu'une identité narrative* » (Ricoeur, 1985: 355).

The Emergence of New Developments in Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre can be understood as the sharing of biographical moments in narrative form, through their immediate transformation into a dynamic mirroring. What is shared becomes incorporated into one's resource for self-knowledge or perception of oneself and others. The method becomes a medium of communication – both magnifying glass and megaphone at the same time - between the individual and the group. A *third dimension* emerges symbolically between Self and Society. Thus Playback Theatre shows itself to be an important tool for identity work: it enables and promotes the formation of a "*narrative identity*" between the individual and the community. While voicing one's own story in this way means, on the one hand, discovering one's story anew, on the other hand it means discovering *Oneself as Another*. Being seen and heard: it initiates a form of mindfulness for others. The dialogical value exists in the sharing of one's own lived stories and experiences and in cooperation with others, in the here and now, bringing them to life, allowing the stories on the stage to have an effect on one, and to examine one's present, personal reality. In this way, new creative paths and processes can be called into existence. A process of *acknowledgement* as an act of reflexivity takes place. Paul Ricoeur (2004) and Axel Honneth (2003, 2005) converge on this essential dynamic and need of mutual acknowledgement in our conflicted modern societies. In order to better understand the historical dimension of this point, it is relevant to note that Honneth is the present Director of the *Institute for Social Research* at the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt (the "Frankfurt School"; among the former directors were Habermas, Adorno and Horkheimer).

On the brink of new *Emergencies*

At the turn of the millennium, a series of meaningful events emerged in the Playback Theatre Community. I would like to mention some of these.

Interplay, the newsletter of the IPTN (International Playback Theatre Network) became a new *online* free access version for a larger public. Its editor, Nick Rowe titled *Interplay* of December 2001: *Tales rescued from oblivion: The construction of Collective Memory*. In this edition, the words of the IPTN President (at that time, Veronica Needa) explained the newly emerging dimension:

“The shift and changes on this planet accelerate. The pulse quickens, and our web of connections, our collective consciousness, sharpens into focus. There is no immunity from accepting responsibility, we are all involved wherever we are” (2001: 2).

From 2001, Jonathan Fox and faculty members of the School of Playback Theatre developed new projects, under the name of "the *Libra Project*": to use playback theatre in conflicted communities as a way to restore dialogue. It "implies restoring the balance of historical, economic, cultural and racial inequality through sharing our stories in playback theatre. Such embodied truth telling between groups with very different perspectives can significantly aid in the long process of reconciliation" (Centre for Playback Theatre, *online*). Bev Hosking taught in Angola, and Jonathan Fox started a program in Burundi funded by a non-governmental organisation called Search for Common Ground. He worked there with Hutu and Tutsi members of a theatre association, and public performances were organised with different communities of Burundi.

As part of the *Libra Project*, in 2006 the School of Playback Theatre organised "a major initiative to bring playback theatre to residents of the US Gulf region devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Because so many of the most severely affected are poor and persons of colour. The Centre has a special mission to give them a voice as well as participate in overall disaster recovery" (Centre for Playback Theatre, *online*).

Having gained insight from such experience, Jonathan Fox started, in 2007, the first training program, entitled *Emergency Playback Europa*, in Budapest, with participants from 10 nations: "when disaster strikes, people desperately need a forum to share their stories". The program in Hungary was "designed to provide European playback theatre practitioners with the tools for delivering playback theatre to communities suffering from a natural or civil emergency" (Centre for Playback Theatre, *online*).

In summer 2008, the Centre for Playback Theatre will organise a program in New Orleans (where Hurricane Katrina took place): *After the Storm: Mobilizing Playback Theatre for Communities in Crisis*. The program focuses on "the complex skill set needed for delivering playback theatre to troubled communities, whether from climate, change, violence, or immigration issues". The program emphasises:

- the social awareness needed to bring assistance in an ethical manner
- a focus on the participants' own communities and concrete opportunities for crisis intervention
- proposals for developing projects in own communities.

The School of Playback Theatre is now transmuted into a resource institution, the resource *Centre for Playback Theatre*, to support world wide projects aimed at "building communities of understanding".

At the beginning of the 21st century, Playback Theatre has advanced to being a comprehensive action-research method for investigation and intervention in educational and social fields.

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