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A Methodological Proposal for the Production of Life Stories
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Introduction

Collecting autobiographical accounts, or life stories, in order to explore past or present social and

cultural realities is not a new practice in the social sciences or humanities. Indeed, in the early

20th century, anthropologists and sociologists, such as those belonging to the Chicago school of

sociology, were already using biographical accounts in their work on immigration and other

issues. Then, after a decline in the 1950s and 60s — when functionalist or structuralist

theoretical frameworks, as well as quantitative data, were often preferred to more descriptive and

qualitative enquiries — the biographical approach made a strong comeback in many research

fields in the 1970s and became a standard methodology in the toolkit of professional and amateur

researchers interested in understanding the worldviews and motives of the concrete actors on the

historical, social and cultural scene. In fact, the use of this methodological tool has skyrocketed

in the past few decades within the context of numerous local, national, family or

community-based projects — perhaps because of its simplicity and the general feeling that no

specialized training is required to collect life stories. This is also true for projects aimed at

exploring the Italian-Canadian experience. Since the 1970s, hundreds (if not thousands) of life

stories of Italian immigrants in Canada and their descendants have been collected here and there

by professional and amateur researchers, and many others are being collected today.

This raises two questions. First, how can the wealth of information contained in this

multitude of autobiographical accounts be disseminated as widely as possible among the people

who are interested in the Italian-Canadian experience, both professionals and non-professionals? Second, do the methodologies used to produce life stories take advantage of the full potential of the autobiographical approach for the exploration of social and cultural phenomena?

As far as the life stories already produced are concerned, this second methodological question is obviously irrelevant. The only thing we can do is reflect on the first question about the dissemination of the autobiographical accounts in what could be a national collection of Italian-Canadian life stories. And what needs to be done corresponds exactly to ICAP's objectives: we need to identify existing life story collections, locate them, identify those that risk being lost, find ways to safeguard them, and — for all collections, both those at risk and those in good condition — negotiate with the owners to establish the conditions that will make it possible to include their collections in a national network that would be accessible to everyone who is interested in the Italian-Canadian experience. As for the life stories that are yet to be collected, it is also important to address the question of methodology, since the various methods used to produce autobiographical accounts can affect both the quality or richness of the material recorded, and the extent to which other researchers might use that material for their own purposes.

Today, I will therefore address the following question: What is the best method of producing life stories if the objective is to: 1) produce autobiographical material that will be as useful as possible to researchers other than those who collected it; and 2) take advantage, as much as possible, of the rich content life stories can potentially deliver?

To suggest an answer to this question, I will do three things. First I'll briefly review the advantages, heuristically speaking, attributed to life stories in the social sciences. Second, I'll try

to highlight some of the limits of the methods most often used by both professional and amateur researchers to produce life stories. Third, I'll conclude by suggesting a methodology that will likely enhance the richness of the information conveyed by the autobiographical material and increase other researchers' capacity to use the life stories produced.

The Usefulness of Life Stories in the Social Sciences

Let's start by recalling some of the main advantages attributed to the autobiographical approach in the social sciences.

A first advantage is the fact that life stories can provide strong descriptions of the past filled with details that are usually neglected when researchers limit themselves to the information contained in sources such as official historical documents, archives, statistical data drawn from answers to questionnaires, and so on. Compared to these more classic sources of information, autobiographical accounts usually contain a host of details that make the individual concrete stories so complex and so diverse. Indeed, in exploring the past through life stories in order to understand people's actions, we are informed of a whole series of factors that might have had some influence: unexpected events or encounters; personal deliberations or strategies based on objectives, aspirations, desires or emotions; choices; compromises; adaptation; renunciation; resistance; inventions using specific knowledge; beliefs; traditions; values; ethical or religious principles; social norms or rules of behavior; and so on.

Given this, autobiographical accounts have been viewed as favoured sources for gathering information on, and from, the members of social categories whose voices are less present, or even absent, in statistics and official archives, such as members of subaltern or

minority groups, members of working-class or immigrant communities, the poor, the unemployed, women, children, the homeless, offenders and other victims of social exclusion. Life stories give researchers access to the explanations provided by these actors themselves concerning their past thoughts and actions, as well as access to the meaning the actors attribute to their practices, and to the situations and events they experienced. By doing so, they also allow researchers to evaluate the degree of liberty that the actors had in relation to other actors and to the institutions or structures that make up the context in which they behave. Obviously, this is also true for research on immigration. To quote a famous article written in the 1970s, one can say that life stories allow us to better understand the immigrant as a protagonist, rather than as "a passive, impotent victim of social and economic forces … propelled through his physical and social environment by external forces activated by his presence but which he could not influence."

It has also been argued that, by giving a diverse group of actors the opportunity to talk about their experiences from their points of view, life stories allow researchers to approach the phenomena they study from various angles. Having at their disposal multiple, and sometimes competing and irreconcilable, perspectives, researchers can resist the temptation to favour one interpretation too quickly to the detriment of others, and can better depict the tense and conflictual nature of the social world.

What is important to highlight here is the fact that all these advantages, and others that I could have mentioned, essentially stem from the life stories' capacity to give access to the actors' point of view on the past, the world and themselves.

The Methodological Limits

Now, given all these benefits of collecting autobiographical accounts to understand historical, social and cultural phenomena such as immigration, one may well wonder if the methods used to produce life stories take full advantage of the potential of those stories. In my opinion, most of the time, the methods generally used achieve this only partially.

In the social sciences, as well as in the context of non-professional projects on immigration, the methods used to produce life stories may vary a lot from one researcher to another, depending on the researchers' personal interests, objectives, theoretical perspectives or sensibilities. Consequently, the expression "life stories" covers various methods that are often tailored to specific research objectives and themes to be explored, such as the economic, social and cultural characteristics of the hometown; the wartime era; the decision to emigrate and the context in which it was made; the Canadian experience in terms of work, housing, family and community relations; gender roles; political involvement; and so no. In fact, in most works, the expression "life stories" refers to interviews that resemble open-ended questionnaires leading to accounts of what the narrators did and experienced in the past that are considered useful for reconstructing specific aspects of immigration, events or experiences. In those works, the researchers typically conduct the interviews using a grid of questions on the specific research topics being studied. Prepared in advance, the grid serves as a framework and is followed more or less systematically. Then, the interviews may move in various directions, depending on what the researchers discover during the discussion, on how well the interviewees can describe certain aspects of the general phenomenon, and on the emergence of interesting leads that the researchers had not considered. If such interviews are called "life stories", it is because the

discussion is centered essentially on the experiences the interviewees had in more or less long segments of their lives and about which they can usually speak at length.

I'm not suggesting that we should reject this approach, which, incidentally, can be heuristically fertile. Neither do I naïvely suggest that, in the social sciences, and in other sciences for that matter, the researchers' influence can be completely eliminated during data collection. But it must be acknowledged that this way of producing life stories has limitations.

Furthermore, when it comes to recording autobiographical accounts that could be useful to other researchers when included in a national collection of life stories, one has to admit that, since the "stories" produced using the methods I just described vary considerably depending on how the researchers orient the interviews through their intervention, it is difficult for other researchers to use those accounts if they are focusing on other topics that call for a different approach and different questions in order to get the information they seek. As a result, more often than not, researchers find themselves with their own collection of stories, which covers their specific area of interest, while being, for the most part, useless to other researchers.

The methodologies generally used to produce life stories also have limitations related to the richness of the content conveyed in the stories. Indeed, producing life stories through an open discussion based on a grid of questions tailored to specific research objectives — even if the grid is more or less strictly followed — means that the researcher influences the resulting content. This influence can be observed, for instance, at the thematic level, since the researcher's questions or interventions define, to a certain extent, the topics to be covered and the categories to be used to address those topics, thus influencing the respondents and their replies through a pre-established conceptual framework. It makes you wonder if the form and content of the life

stories produced would have been different without the researcher's interventions. For example, would the narrators have given more or less importance to the description of life in Italy and life in Canada without the researcher's invitation to talk about these two periods in their life? Would the narrators have talked about their native village, wartime, the decision to emigrate, work, housing, family, community life, and so on in the same way and for the same length of time without the researcher's questions on these topics? Moreover, since a life story is a representation of a person through the story of the person's life, the researcher's influence can also be observed at the level of the identities expressed and used by the interviewees to portray themselves at different moments in their lives based on the knowledge, beliefs, values, social norms or rules, and ethical or religious principles that form their system of representations and identities. Let's consider, for instance, the decision to emigrate as the topic addressed at a certain point in the interview. And let's suppose that a researcher asks a woman the following: "What did the possibility of emigrating to Canada mean for you as a woman and a mother?" The researcher obviously invites the interviewee to adopt the categories of "woman" and "mother" as starting identities when portraying herself in relation to that period in her life. And it makes you wonder if the same interviewee would have used these identity categories if she had had the chance to talk about her decision to go to Canada without any intervention on the part of the researcher. The same point could be raised if the researcher asked a man, "Did the fact that friends from your hometown had moved to Canada influence your decision to move there as well?" Here, the question is whether the narrator would have freely adopted what we can call the *paesano* identity that he is invited to adopt to portray himself — i.e., the identity referring to his belonging to the local community of origin. The same sort of question can be asked with respect

to all the other identity categories that the researcher's interventions might have introduced during the interviews, such as "Italian", "Italian-Canadian", "Calabrian", "citizen", *paesano*, "father" or "mother", "man" or "woman", "rich" or "poor", "worker" or "businessman". Unfortunately, for life stories that have already been produced, it is impossible to know how the narrators would have portrayed themselves without any intervention on the part of the researchers. Neither is it possible to exploit the full potential of life stories to introduce us to the point of view of the narrators, their view of themselves and their worldview in general.

A Methodological Proposal

Given these methodological limitations, can we come up with a method of producing life stories that, while designed for specific research purposes, could also result in both material that is useful to other researchers when included in a national collection of Italian-Canadian life stories and narratives that give as much access as possible to the narrators' view of themselves and the world by minimizing the researchers' influence?

I would like to propose a method that I've been using since the 1990s. Essentially, the researchers introduce the projects to the interviewees and then record the life stories in three stages.

Researchers can introduce their projects to the potential narrators on the phone or at an initial meeting, and the introduction can vary according to the project. However, in order to minimize the researchers' influence right from the start, the projects should be presented as broadly as possible, using general descriptions such as: "My research is aimed at recording the life stories of people who, like you, immigrated to Canada." Some additional information can be

provided, concerning, for instance, the researcher's intention or motivation, using statements such as: "Your life story is important because the information it offers cannot be found in other sources. What you remember about what you went through is unique and deserves to be safeguarded." At this stage, it's important to avoid mentioning the specifics that are of interest to the researchers, as well as the particular questions the researchers have in mind. Furthermore, I recommend that this initial contact with the narrators and the actual recording of the life stories be separated by a few days. And it is also useful to make it clear to the future interviewees that they will be asked to tell their life story, to give them a chance to think about their past, jog their memory and, more importantly, reflect on the way they want to present the story and themselves through it.

The life stories can then be compiled in three stages. At the first working meeting, the recording of the life stories should start with only one request from the researchers, which refers to the production of a life story, strictly speaking. This request should again be general and could take the following form: "By going back as far as you wish in the past and moving forward to today, could you please tell me the story of your life." A variant of this request with a more precise focus could be: "By going back as far as you wish in the past and moving forward to today, could you please tell me the story of your life and how immigration became part of it." This might, however, influence the interviewees, since it reiterates the researchers' interest in the theme of immigration, already mentioned when the interviewees were initially contacted. In any case, at this stage, the interviewees are, to a large extent free to build their life stories as they see fit and are invited to take as much time as they wish. Still, in order to minimize the researchers' influence in the construction of the life stories, should questions be necessary, the researchers

should allow themselves to ask only questions such as "And what happened after?" to encourage the narrators to continue telling their stories if they stop. Based on my own experience, this first stage usually produces life stories whose length may vary a lot, anywhere from thirty minutes to six hours, the longest ones requiring several meetings to give the interviewees a chance to rest. These life stories can be considered representative of the way the narrators sought to shape an image of themselves diachronically (what they were and what they became) by drawing upon the themes and identities through which they wished to represent themselves in different passages of their stories. For instance, when addressing the issue of the decision to immigrate to Canada, a man could say, "It didn't rain at all that summer, the crops were very poor, and I had to leave." In this case, he would be portraying himself as an "object" of climatic factors that gave him no choice but to emigrate. Another man could say, "It didn't rain at all that summer, the crops were very poor, and I didn't have enough money to buy shoes for my children to go to school. I couldn't take it, so I decided to leave." In this case, he portrays himself as a subject of his decision to emigrate and, given the reasons that led to that decision, he portrays himself as a "father" in terms of identities. Another example would be that of an individual stating, "All my friends from the village had left for Toronto and I missed them, so I decided to join them in Canada." In this case, at this precise point in the narration, the person would be portraying himself or herself as a *paesano* or a *paesana*, a member of a local community in terms of identity. Finally, another interviewee might declare, "I always had an adventurous spirit. I wanted to discover the world and have new experiences." This person would be portraying himself or herself in terms of identities related to what we could call the modern individual trying to fulfill personal desires. I'm giving all these examples to show how, by leaving

interviewees free to build their life story as they wish, the result we obtain can give us access to a whole series of identities that form the narrators' identity kit and that the narrators feel are important to use to portray themselves from their own point of view. This gives researchers a chance to exploit the rich content associated with autobiographical accounts.

The second stage in the recording of life stories should consist of one or more additional meetings with the interviewees focused on the life stories produced during the first stage. These meetings are aimed at collecting more information about what the narrators said in their autobiographical account. For instance, if the narrators said that they decided to do this or that but did not explain why, when or how, the meetings can serve to complete the stories with additional explanations without modifying the structure of the life stories or adding other subjects to them. The prompts used to get those additional details can include questions such as: Why did you decide to do such and such? Where was it? When did that occur? What did you do? At that point, the researchers' intervention is obviously accentuated because the interviewees can become aware of their areas of interest. But since that influence comes after the version of the life stories produced in the first stage, which was freely constructed, and since it simply yields information to supplement what has already been stated, it can be said that, at that stage, the life stories are still based on the narrators' worldviews and on the ways they want to portray themselves. We can thus say that the recordings made in the first two stages constitute a kind of raw material that, while serving the purposes of specific research projects, can also be used as the basis of other analyses by other researchers. Those recordings can also be considered as raw material that preserves, as much as possible, the narrators' view of themselves and their past, while offering, at the same time, unexpected aspects, unforeseen explanatory elements, or

original leads or hypotheses to be explored.

It is only in the third stage, which can also require one or more meetings, that researchers should allow themselves to deal with the narrators' past experiences by using a grid of questions and themes developed for the purposes of their specific research and that take into account the narrators' capacity to explore various aspects of their past experiences. This third stage can thus be viewed as an open-ended interview like those I described earlier. But since that interview takes place in the last stage, its orientation by the researcher, in terms of themes addressed or identities expressed, doesn't affect what has already been recorded more freely.

Conclusion

This is the kind of standardized method I suggest be used in the future to produce life stories of Italian-Canadian immigrants and their descendants — a method that would maximize, as I said, both the usefulness of those life stories for as many researchers as possible and the richness of the content of the autobiographical accounts in terms of access to the narrators' points of view and the meanings the narrators attribute to their past experiences.