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Mariagrazia Santagati

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1. Author information

Mariagrazia Santagati

Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan,
Italy

2. Author e-mail address

Mariagrazia Santagati

E-mail: mariagrazia.santagati@unicatt.it

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Mariagrazia Santagati*

Corresponding author:
Mariagrazia Santagati
E-mail: mariagrazia.santagati@unicatt.it

Abstract

The article illustrates the method of the Su.Per. project (*Success in educational pathways* of students with immigrant background), based on autobiographies of successful students with an immigrant background, attending upper secondary education in Northern Italy. The methodological choice of the project is inspired by 'The Polish Peasant' by Thomas and Znaniecki and highlights the importance of using the biographical approach to understand unexpected and atypical situations – such as success stories of vulnerable students. Within this approach, autobiography represents a reflexive and imaginative 'exercise' to observe, in a non-prescriptive manner, the intertwining between actor and structure, human creativity and tradition, innovation and conservation, predestined and unexpected paths.

Finally, the fruitfulness of this method is shown presenting some results deriving from the Su.Per. project. Writing their 'educational autobiographies', disadvantaged students build plural narrative of success – oriented to performance, good relationships, cooperation, etc. –, in which it is possible to discover new horizons and meanings of the success, and (perhaps) a renewed role for social scientists in analysing and imagining a less unequal future.

Keywords: autobiography, immigrant-origin students, unexpected pathways.

1. Introduction

The immigrant background represents one of the main sources of social and educational inequalities in Western societies: if compared with native students, immigrant ones show persistent disadvantages in the learning process,

* Department of Sociology, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy.

due to the social background of their foreign families, to the difficulties deriving from migration, or to the discriminatory treatment received in the educational system of the country of arrival (Banks, Parks, 2010). At the same time, data show that school success is possible for socio-economically disadvantaged students (OECD, 2018), although the ‘unexpected pathways’ of successful students with an immigrant background represent an unusual and under-investigated topic (as emerges from literature reviews: Stevens, Dworkin, 2019). More research about vulnerable students who succeed in education is needed, in order to understand how they negotiate structural and cultural constraints and manage opportunities in their route to success. By focusing mainly on the role of agency, the article is based on the Su.Per. project – *Success in educational pathways of students with immigrant background* –, an empirical research based on the autobiographies of a group of 65 immigrant-origin students attending upper secondary education in multicultural schools of Northern Italy (Santagati, 2018). The project investigates the emancipation of immigrant youth through education, choosing the sociological autobiography as a method to write, comprehend and imagine social spaces of resistance to socio-educational inequalities. This methodological choice, inspired by ‘The Polish Peasant in Europe and in America’ by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920), highlights the importance of using the biographical approach to understand unexpected and atypical situations – such as stories of successful vulnerable students.

The fruitfulness of the method is shown through the analysis of the different meaning of success emerging from the empirical documents. Through the biographical lens, the process that leads immigrant students to this success is investigated, in relation to the institutional and structural opportunities, as well as to the individual strategies implemented in order to reduce ethnic inequalities.

2. Biographical documents in sociology. A methodological premise

The analysis of the successful trajectories of immigrant students can be based on a specific methodological premise: the biographical approach seems to be particularly suitable to deepen the possible social change that derives from the impact of immigration on education (Ruokonen-Engler, Siouti, 2014). In fact, the biographical point of view offers a way to analyze the agency of immigrant students, thus interpreting the intersection between migration and education, with its ambivalent implications for social actors and contexts.

According to Morrice (2014), there is a sort of unpredictability regarding the migration-learning link, as learning can have both positive and negative outcomes for migrants. On the one hand, migrants have experienced migration

as a traumatic event that transforms past experiences (education, qualification, language, etc.) into 'non-resources', unnecessary in the educational system and in the labor market. On the other hand, migration paradoxically motivates and immunizes immigrants, therefore representing an important learning process of new cultural, linguistic, and personal abilities to move on and overcome difficulties. Within this non-deterministic view, the biographical analysis records the social reality from the point of view of subjects. It assumes the ethnic difference not only in terms of the reproduction of predefined destinies, but also in a complex process in which students inherit social disadvantages from their parents, but are at the same time able to reduce their effects (Apitzsch, Siouti, 2007).

This methodological choice is certainly not considered as mainstream in the international literature, even if qualitative research has assumed a growing importance in migration studies concerning young immigrants (Yalaz, Zapata-Barrero, 2018). In *Migration and Biography* (1990) – considered the first biographical investigation on migration of contemporary sociology – Ursula Apitzsch empirically demonstrates that young people of immigrant origin in Germany are social actors who act, produce and transform their social environment, thanks to their attitudes, which lead them to upward mobility and emancipation from the working-class position of their parents (Apitzsch, Siouti, 2014).

However, this approach to the study of migration has been present in the sociological thought since its beginnings. Since the advent of modern industrial society and the birth of sociology, the biographical trajectories of migrants have been used to highlight the connection between human mobility, social mobility, socialisation, re-socialisation and lifelong learning (Alheit, 1994). In fact, 'The Polish Peasant' is the first transnational research on migration, and it attributes a central importance to the way in which migrants represent, reflect and give meaning to their lives and their relationships. It examines how they adapt to new living conditions and tries to understand the change of the link between individual attitudes and social values. In methodological terms, moreover, this seminal work represents a cornerstone for the future development of the biographical approach, with hundreds of personal documents collected, including about 700 letters written by immigrants and exchanged between Poland and the United States. In Thomas and Znaniecki's vision, expressed in the methodological note, these empirical documents correspond to the 'perfect sociological material', which includes the widest variety of social phenomena and allows to analyse 'abnormal' cases, in order to understand social transformations (1968: 16-17). The two scholars, albeit in an embryonic way, point out that the focus on unexpected pathways is related to a sociological challenge that does not distinguish *a priori*, normal from abnormal, typical from

atypical, standard from non-standard. On the contrary, this distinction arises from on field research and from a systematic analysis of biographical documents carried out in a non-prescriptive manner.

3. Sociological autobiography: a reflexive (and educational) exercise

Within the biographical approach, sociological autobiography occupies an important place, dating back to the origins of the tradition of qualitative sociology. Already 100 years ago, the fourth volume of the original edition of the aforementioned work by Thomas and Znaniecki was entitled 'Autobiography of an immigrant': nearly 300 pages long, it is dedicated to the life of Wladek Wiszniewski, an autobiography of a Polish peasant, a reflexive and retrospective exercise stimulated by the two authors.

This text reveals that writing about life is central in Thomas and Znaniecki's sociological view: through autobiographical narratives, people represent themselves while facing the social change deriving from migration. These narratives are an interesting source of knowledge about the social world and the relationships between people constructing themselves in situational and relational ways. As Gallino wrote (1968), the long autobiography of a young immigrant is 'the best non-Freudian contribution given to the analysis of the relationships between personality and social systems' (1968: XIX), in which the pioneering role of two scholars in the development of the theory of social action emerges. According to Thomas and Znaniecki's vision, the subjects present themselves as the product, but as producers and creators, of their own environment (Stanley, 2010).

More recently, C.W. Mills (1959) has discussed the imagination in sociological work, referring to the importance of writing as an everyday commitment for sociologists, in order to analyse, examine, and write about social reality, with the aim of increasing citizens' degree of freedom and their opportunity to participate. Through sociological writing, in fact, it is possible to discover that 'we are determined and we are also determinant; we are influenced, but also influencers, inventors, creators of those institutions that give us explanations and of which we give explanations' (Beltrán Llavador, 2002: 26). Later on, also Merton has proposed the idea of the autobiography as a sociological exercise to advance in scientific knowledge, since in the text the intertwining between actor and structure, human creativity and tradition, innovation and conservation, predestined and unexpected paths, is constructed and identified by the sociologists (Merton, 1988).

Recently, Lahire (2004) has deepened this view by analysing writing practices and their connections with social analysis and social actions. He

considers writing as a form of 'external reflexivity', which implies transforming into a written text thoughts, motivations, tasks, schedules, routines, emotions, projects, memories, and establishing an objective distance from one's own social actions. By becoming an object to oneself, writing creates a symbolic control towards what was (perhaps) controlled before in a practical way. Writing generates reflexivity, gives rise to new reflections, explores pre-existing ideas or looks at them differently, by basing on a process in which thoughts, feelings, symbols and images are selected, filtered and ordered. To Lahire, autobiographical writing is never disconnected from social action, and it allows us to make sense of past actions, to extend the effects of the past into the present and to monitor the action in its progress, as well as to prepare future actions (Lahire, 2008).

In this frame, autobiography is considered an interesting technique for social research, which raises three questions: what do we mean by the *self*? What do we mean by *life*? And what do we expect that might *emerge* in the process of writing? (Plummer, 2001). Life writing is a narrative construction of self that people develop from the events of one's past, but which can also concern the present and the future. It allows a subject to work through aspects of one's own personal history, to manage them, modify them, reconnect them and offer new meanings. Unlike literature, social sciences consider writing not as a goal in itself, but rather as a vehicle of thought; unlike psychology, sociology supposes the existence of a collective referent for individual subjectivities; unlike history, time is not the starting point, but the result of a choice to reflect on the present and its relation to the past (Bichi, 1999: 28-29). Life writing is a form of thought: it is not immediate like speech, but rather represents a second-level description that enables the subject to distance himself/herself from lived experience, obliging him/her to summarise and reflect on his/her educational experience. Even though writing is difficult, it can offer imaginative spaces that can build resilience and resistance and forge the self through a developmental process facilitated by writing, in a sort of communion with others (Merrill, West, 2009).

4. Reflecting on migration and education in contemporary societies. Some research results

Within this debate, and starting from these reflections, the Su.Per. project uses the biographical approach to understand stories of successful vulnerable immigrant students. The research is promoted by CIRMIB (Centre for Initiatives and Research on Migrations – Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore), and represents an original sociological study on inequalities in education. It is told from the point of view of successful students with an immigrant background,

with the aim of introducing and highlighting unusual ways of reading and analyzing the impact of migrations on education.

These students have been selected by using specific criteria drawn from a literature review (Azzolini et al., 2019; Colombo, Santagati, 2017; Santagati, 2015) and from focus groups with teachers. These include: good educational integration, high performances, high cognitive skills, good relationships with peers and teachers, high non-cognitive skills (perseverance, grit, determination, strong motivation to learn, high ambition), openness to democratic values and intercultural attitudes. The research project involved a group of 65 students of immigrant origin aged 14-19, both male and female, foreign-born and native-born, of 23 different nationalities and attending different kinds of upper secondary schools (lyceums, vocational and technical institutes), in the province of Brescia, an area in Northern Italy emblematic of multicultural schools. The students were asked to write an 'educational autobiography' by using a self-interview grid, aimed at helping them recount the most relevant experiences, encounters, emotions and choices undertaken during their educational careers. They were asked to remember their past educational life, reflect on their educational present and imagine their future, while analyzing successes and failures, and offer some advice to other students in order to encourage them in their educational path.

The collected autobiographies (published in Santagati, 2019) offer a wide repertoire of reflexivity on the educational and migratory processes in contemporary multicultural societies. These life stories are full of many sociological suggestions, useful to advance in the sociological comprehension of great social transformations deriving from the deep change in the process of socialization and global mobility (Maccarini, 2019), which interacts with the individual personalities, attitudes and strategies expressed in each autobiography.

The career of these students towards their success is a complex process, made of lights and shadows, of temporary failures or achieved goals, of wrong or right choices, of logical or illogical behaviors and actions, of joy and pain, losses and gains, which are part of a wide process of transformation and biographical learning which is rooted, in particular, in the family experience, and in the contradictory and ambivalent, limiting and liberating experience, which is migration. This success is linked to a learning process that appears deeply rooted in the migration process. At the same time, migration appears as a biographical rupture that becomes an asset; an experience of family sufferance and failure, but also a source of biographical learning; a chance to reflect on failure and gain awareness of disadvantage; an experience that transmits and fosters cognitive and non-cognitive skills – learnt with the support of family and teachers – that are crucial for educational success.

In these paragraphs, I would like to propose an introductory analysis of the autobiographies, focusing on the different meanings of educational and biographical success, as it emerges from the texts in an inductive way. First, success is defined in terms of results and goals: the autobiographical narratives refer to the cognitive dimension of success, which translates into excellent performances and good marks. Students represent these goals as individual outcomes, deriving especially from individual skills and talents and narrated through a meritocratic rhetoric that recognizes the reasons for success in exceptional individual gifts (Konyali, 2014).

Fatum (Morocco). Last year I reached the top. The school leader warned me about the exam result: 10!

Anita (India). A successful result in this school is my first 10 in Italian. I have received many 10s, but never in Italian and, honestly, I had never thought of getting it and, in fact, all my class applauded.

Desi Girl (Pakistan). A memorable moment was when I got my third-year scholarship, for the first time in my life. I felt happy, I jumped for joy, and my parents were proud of me.

Molly (Moldavia). At the beginning, three years ago, Italian was for me an unknown language; at the end of this school year, I was one of the best students in my class and my name was written in the newspaper. And this was my biggest victory.

Some students underline, even more clearly, the individual meaning of success: the positive objectives in their school career (and in the biography) are the result of personal commitment, of individual abilities, and of one's own merits, which are considered to be a consequence of being different' (because of an immigrant background) – an aspect that is seen not only as a limit, but also as a strength and an advantage, thanks to the ability to distinguish oneself and stand out compared to the others.

Destiny (Morocco). Being the best for me is not just a potential, but being a person who believes in herself and who fights for her dreams, who, when she fails, she immediately gets up and fights even more... The diversity of immigration is an exceptional gift I have.

Success, however, does not always correspond to the result and reveals its temporary and transitory nature. In this sense, success is seen as a continuous process: some students point out that the challenge of success is given by a perspective of lifelong improvement and learning. 'True success' is achieved through the ability to not give up in times of crisis, to face and overcome obstacles and failures, to show perseverance, cultivating hopes and ambitions

for the future. These students show the capability to manage complexity, uncertainty and variability, an idea of agency related to negotiation and constant reflexivity exercised on the life experience (Alheit, Dausien, 2000; Colombo, Rebughini, 2019).

Mr. Nobody (Philippines). Even if I don't feel like a successful student, I think I have ambitions. 'Things to do in this life' is the name I gave to my list of projects; about this list, sometimes, I also talk with the teachers... maybe that's why the teachers define me as a 'good student' ... I prefer to call myself a 'student full of hope'.

Tiana (Pakistan). It is not easy to tell my story, because it means reliving all the moments of crisis and difficulty that, instead, I would never want to experience again... I want to show all the emotions I felt during that time and how I came to success. I never thought that one day I would write my experience and that I would share it with others. I was very lucky not to give up and keep on hoping, after a failure. I tried until I overcame the obstacles that didn't allow me to achieve my goals. You must always face uncertainties and never stop trying again.

The last dimension of success, underlined in the students' autobiographies, is the socio-relational one: success is not only narrated as a gift or an individual talent, but derives from relational wellbeing with peers and teachers, from being recognized and respected by others, from having a good reputation. These students present themselves as being able to help classmates, assuming also representative roles at the service of the classroom or of the whole school. This idea of success comes from recognizing that they need help (even if they are good students) and this is one of the strategies to manage the difficulties arising from immigration.

Georgia (Senegal). I always try to do my best: I represent my class as student president, I try to help my classmates and other students.

Jenny (Tunisia). To be successful means: to be altruistic, to be able to face problems and find solutions, even when it seems impossible. Therefore, being an excellent student means being able to feel good with myself and with others.

Krin (Mauritius). To be a good student, you have to know how to explain things to those who don't understand them, so that they can understand.

5. Concluding remarks. New horizons of success

In the analysis of students' autobiographies, two narratives of success are outlined: one more individualistic and oriented to results and performances, in which diversity is perceived as an exceptional resource emerging in a competitive 'game'. The other, based on a recognition of the relational, social, collaborative, collective nature of success in the educational process, in which the positive objectives for the individual are also significant for the groups. From this last meaning, new horizons of success can emerge, in which students learn not to overestimate or underestimate their individual resources and abilities, considering their own diversity as an advantage for the whole community, in a possibilist vision of the future in which one can become what he/she wants to be, regardless of the initial disadvantages.

More methodological reflections on writing and on autobiography in sociology could be made, considering the socialization process and the social change in the growing multicultural generations. However, from this brief analysis, plural narratives and visions of success appear on the scene, thus confirming that, through the empirical research, it is possible to imagine changes that are unimaginable in the present (Pellegrino, 2019). Through a research activity based on the collection of autobiographies of disadvantaged students, we can re-discover the possibility of their educational and biographical success, as well as new horizons and meanings of the collective success, and a renewed role for social scientists in analysing, criticizing, and perhaps designing a less unequal future.

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