

## **Narrative: in search of lost meaning**

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## *Narrative: in search of lost meaning*

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### **Abstract**

The de-institutionalization of biographies and life paths, and the fact that they are increasingly exposed to deviations with increasingly uncertain transient routes makes the personal biographies more and more reflexive and makes the identity of postmodern man more and more fragmented. In this way, narrating to oneself and narrating oneself to others is a way to recover at least some of the certainties lost in our liquid modernity. Narrative favours the construction or recomposition of identity. Indeed, the self takes shape and is structured by describing itself both inwardly and to others through a process of negotiating meaning. Additionally, in this way it is possible to reduce the fragmentary nature that characterises current biographies to some extent, recovering sense and meaning for one's own experiences and identity, and managing to recognise oneself and be recognised through one's personal social identity.

Keywords: narrative, reflexive biographies, identity

### **1. Postmodern biographies: reflexivity and opportunities for recomposition**

Society exerts an increasingly minor influence on individual life stories and biographies as it offers an increasingly meagre range of clear supports and solid points of reference (although they are not completely absent). Put another way, individual identities are becoming increasingly less assigned from birth and more and more subject to change. We now speak of transitory identities more frequently; these are chosen freely but are temporary in nature, as well as often being multiple and fragmented. This is the context for the liquid modernity described by Zigmunt Bauman (2001), where life is seen as liquid, an existence in which there no longer seem to be constants; everything changes so quickly that in the time it takes to learn to cope with a given situation the facts have changed, the situation is modified and the available tools immediately become inadequate. A certain degree of instability also takes shape and grows within this liquidity. It is to this end that Ulrich Beck (1986) puts forward the reflexive or do-it-yourself biography: an autonomous individual project (which risks having an individualising effect in the author's opinion) for "writing" one's own life story in an attempt to construct the self and give shape to one's destiny, in which the ego is seen as a reflexive process for which the individual is responsible. In this sense biographies are in a constant state of revision and planning one's existence is an intense reflexive exercise. Liberated from all pre-structuring given by social (and casual) placement received at birth, the course of a life is open and flexible in post-modern society. To this end Beck expresses himself as follows: each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing biographies become self-reflexive. Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied, no longer can be, they must be made. In the individualized society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning

office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on (Beck, 1986). As a result one even has to choose one's social identity and group membership, in this way managing one's own self, changing its *image* (*ibidem*). Anthony Giddens also refers to reflexivity, explaining that the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves. Otherwise, however, what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which she or he engages (Giddens, 1991).

Whether in the intimate sphere or the work environment, no certainties can be counted on any more; instead there is only acrobatic self-production. In this way, however, we find ourselves before biographies immersed in a condition of permanent danger, constantly at risk, also because they are bordering on a degenerative process leading to collapse (Beck, 1986). The opportunity to protect one's own existence autonomously is definitely one of the products of modernity. However, although this biographical independence does not lack a certain potential charm, it is difficult to implement for the majority of us, as this autonomy always depends on others, whether significant or generalised, just as it relies on social and public institutions. As Bauman observes (2000), it also seems that there is a widespread explorative attitude: attempts are made with unplanned results rather than goals clearly defined from the beginning, which were linked to the ascriptive characters of individuals in the distant past. The construction of identity becomes a form of challenge in which responsibility passes from the social to the individual sphere. The propensity for reflexivity is therefore seen above all as an indispensable component for the construction and reconstruction of a coherent gratifying sense of identity and these reconstructive attempts can be found in integrating life experiences within the narrative of self-development. The key reference points are set from the inside, in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his life history (Giddens, 1991).

In the author's opinion, the fragmented identity of postmodern man finds an opportunity to affirm itself in narrative, using it to give its constituent fragments sense by connecting them to each other: through forms of do-it-yourself identity, narrative thus appears as an accumulation of small fragments of stories heard, stories listened to, stories read, the hermeneutics of what is seen and what happens to us and others, interpretations. Narrative therefore acts in this way, restoring meaning to oneself and contributing to the rereading and rewriting of one's own story and to the opening of a different outlook on reality, thereby aiding the construction of personal identity (Batini, Del Sarto, 2005).

Identity as narrative, narrating to oneself and narrating oneself to others (Melucci, 2000), is a way to recover at least some of the certainties lost in Bauman's liquid modernity. Identity as narrative is therefore seen as a practice to identify those boundaries which are now liquid and dissolving. This is because identity is an image of ourselves that we produce in an interior process, which is consolidated, recognised and solidified through interaction with others. Cooperative narratives are constantly produced during this interaction, the basis for the so-called narrative construction of identity (Mantovani, 1999). Recounting one's biography to oneself in the interior conversation that accompanies us on a daily basis or telling it to others or seeing it acknowledged by others as listeners or co-protagonists acts as a cornerstone of fragmented identity (see Bovone, 2006). As an eminently social practice, narrative is also the nexus between individual and collective identities, it is the place where individual identity becomes social: like saying that we cannot explain the fragmented postmodern identity once and for all, we have to gather its stories together (Bovone, 2006). The practice of narrative is therefore one of the possible responses to the challenge of identity and consequently of modernity or post-modernity too. However, this challenge must not be faced with the intention of serialising identity and the identities of the products. These must remain unique and original, the result of processes that each person directs in his or her experience in which there is a story to tell and a story which can be listened to (see Batini, Del Sarto, 2005).

## **2. Narratives: recompose while narrating**

Narrative is innate to man and has always been present: its origins date back to the dawn of sociality and interhuman relations. For a long time the so-called 'end of great narratives' (Lyotard,

1981; Geertz, 1995) undermined this practice, but in the 1970s and 1980s it regained momentum, albeit in a very different way from before. The difference was that interest became focused on redimensioned narratives regarding single individuals.

The narration of stories stems from a special way of thinking which distinguishes all human beings: everyday reasoning is guided by narrative thought along with logical-paradigmatic thought (Smorti, 1994). While the latter employs reasoning strategies from formal logic and builds laws, it does not lend itself much to solving problems regarding the social sphere. Narrative thought runs parallel and acts as a complement to it, but is linked to the need to give sense and meaning to situations perceived to be incomprehensible. It is distinguished by the fact that it refers to the concrete sphere of human reality: in order to understand ourselves and others we need to mould our actions and those of others into a story, a narrative context in which our life assumes meaning. When narrative thought is articulated in autobiographical form, telling about itself, it involves a meeting between retrospective thought (recounting what happened in the more or less recent past) and prospective thought (imagining what might happen, or what is hoped for, wished or feared). Narrative thought is positioned right at the centre of this meeting between retrospective and prospective thought (see Batini, Del Sarto, 2005). It is typical of everyday reasoning, as it allows human events to be interpreted by creating a story that establishes a network of relations between subjects' actions and intentions in a precise context. This is the typical thinking of the kind of narrative through which reality is understood, depicted and communicated to ourselves and others, because narratives are not photographs of reality but attributions of meaning applied to it by individuals. However, narration does not only have the function of interpretation but also structures ways of thinking about ourselves, or what we usually call self-consciousness (the inner world) (Batini, Del Sarto, 2005).

People make use of stories to describe what happens in the world around them on a daily basis: every one of us tends to position a given event within a set of historical narratives, which include both the individuals that act and the settings in which the action takes place. Storytelling therefore becomes a way to give meaning to reality and personal experience by providing an interpretation for ourselves and others.

As the philosopher and sociologist MacIntyre affirms, man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth (MacIntyre, 1981). To this end identity can also be imagined as a structure that includes both logical elements and elements like beliefs, values and personal goals. The latter can be adequately interpreted and understood using the model and narrative thought (Paolicchi, 1994). It is therefore natural to imagine the self in narrative form. An individual's identity is closely linked to his personal history: it is what issues from the characters played, the roles filled and the actions carried out.

Biographical narratives evolve from the actions (or omissions) of the protagonists and are developed with the use of vocabulary that outlines the boundaries between one's own actions and the conditions in which one acted and could not have acted differently. Lived and recounted lives are closely interconnected and Bauman explains that the stories told of lives interfere with the lives lived before the lives have been lived to be told. Life stories are ostensibly guided by the modest ambition to instil (in retrospect) an inner logic and meaning into the lives they retell. In fact, the code they knowingly or unknowingly observe shapes the lives they tell about as much as it shapes their narratives and the choice of villains and heroes. One lives one's life as a story yet to be told, but the way the story is to be told is to be woven decides the technique by which the yarn of life is spun (Bauman, 2001).

With these methods narrative favours the construction or recomposition of identity. Indeed, the self takes shape and is structured by describing itself both inwardly and to others through a process of negotiating meaning. This is because narrative, which is above all a language, is a cultural artefact and a social action (social inter-action): the act of narrating is in itself a relational act within a communicative relationship between the narrator and the listener and an exchange action whose subject is the story and the narrative. Individual identity also becomes social in this toing and froing. Storytelling thus turns out to be the main form of producing meaning, interpreting and explaining what is unknown to the listener but also often to the narrator, to the point where an individual finds himself inside his own narrative: narrating is the favoured place for sense-making,

with regard to the self, what happens to us, what we experience and what others, for whom we are spectators or co-protagonists, experience.

We must, however, also consider diametrically opposed positions, above all the 'biographical illusion' which Pierre Bourdieu used to admonish the biographical approach (Bourdieu, 1994).

### **3. Between illusion and opportunity**

In Pierre Bourdieu's opinion the real is discontinuous: starting from the postulate of the constancy of the nominal (Bourdieu, 1994), he claims that it is our name that confers unity on existence and grants us constant lasting social identity: the social world has available all sorts of institutions of integration and unification of the self. The most obvious of these is clearly the proper name, which, in as much as it is a rigid designator, designs the same object in whichever world is possible, or in concrete terms in different parts of the same social field or in different fields at the same time (*ibidem*). The name therefore pinpoints social identity; as an institution it is removed from time, space and places, guaranteeing the individual nominal constancy, identity with a sense of identity with oneself that social order requires (*ibidem*). Identity thus consists of no more than personal details, the only data that can give an individual unity and totality over time and space. It is therefore an illusion that a coherent history can be constructed, as biographies are discontinuous and incoherent by definition (see Denzin, 1989), just like the lives that they depict, and people know how to go about their daily business without the need to transform this knowledge into discursive form (cit. in Baert, 2002). Bourdieu rejects a philosophy of history as a series of events and refutes the idea that it is possible to make a tale, narrative or novel out of it. In his opinion, the subject and object of biographical narrative deconstruct and reconstruct the life in question according to an intelligible logic because the inclination toward making oneself the ideologist of one's own life, through the selection of a few significant events with a view to elucidating an overall purpose, and through the creation of causal or final links between them which will make them coherent, is reinforced by the biographer who is naturally inclined, especially through his formation as a professional interpreter, to accept this artificial creation of meaning (Bourdieu, 1994). Ideologies therefore tend to be created by selecting events from one's life deemed to be significant and making them coherent. The result is naturally the artificial creation of meaning. Bourdieu claims that it is not possible to conceive of life in terms of a story, or as a linear path which develops from a starting point through a series of stages to reach an end. Life cannot be considered as a whole, accompanied by coherent intentionality or clear planning aimed at reaching a goal that gives meaning to existence. The categories of meaning and direction lose their validity and life can no longer be treated as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events: it is a rhetorical illusion that comes to us from the literary tradition, all the more so if we consider that significantly enough, the structure of the novel as a linear narrative was dropped at the time when the vision of life as an unfolding strip, both in terms of meaning and direction, was brought into question (*ibidem*). He also underlines the role of certain social processes in the construction of a life history, a sort of perfect artifice, so that the formalisation of a private presentation of one's life is conditioned by restrictions and censoring, the form of discourse, the situation in question and the portrayal that the subject makes of what he is experiencing.

We agree that it is undoubtedly illusory to claim that an individual life is objectively a story and that as such it already has an intrinsic unitary meaning of its own. Modernity itself has shown extensively just how deceptive this is. However, it is precisely because an individual life is not a story in the sense intended by Bourdieu that attempts are made to render it so (Lichtner, 2008), all the more so in the current climate of liquid modernity and society individualised for the needs of recomposition seen thus far. By its very formation, in addition to building a story the act of narration also provides interpretations by constantly selecting what is deemed to be most relevant through the choice of certain facts and the omission of others, with the same narrative making connections, incisions, sequences, deviations, returns and new starts. Bourdieu's admonition is partly embraced in all this, as the fact that every reconstruction and every narrative are relative and provisional is never eliminated or underestimated, just as conversely identities are consequently in

constant evolution, involving an ongoing process of fragmentation and recomposition. These relative and provisional qualities are related to the fact that the meanings which an individual attributes to his experience are connected in a relation of dependence by the moment and stage that the individual is currently experiencing in his life cycle. Furthermore, although it is relative, it is the attributed meaning that leads, directs and controls action, so much so that as retrospective reflection it has the function of confirming or revising, making the implicit explicit, and expresses the need for even further clarification (Lichtner, 2008).

#### **4. Narrating the self**

We shall now examine some of the theoretical presuppositions of the biographical approach, lying within the mind's innate ability to translate experience into narrative terms. The starting assumption is that our entire life consists of what we tell ourselves and recount to others about us. Whenever we express an idea or carry out an action, it is always the result of interpretation on our part, containing the value and meaning that we give our experiences, which in turn are the result of our interaction in a given social context. When we communicate we do not only refer what we think, but we also manifest the meaning, the interpretation that we give to the episodes and events we have experienced. It is therefore these meanings that constitute the foundation of our identity and it is this interpretive method, the cornerstone of narratives, which typifies narrative thought.

Personal meaning and personal reality are effectively constructed during the conceptualisation and presentation of one's own narrative; experiences assume the form of the narratives that we use to describe them and the stories are no more than the method used by individuals to organise, attribute meaning to and interpret their lived experiences, guaranteeing a certain sense of continuity (Bruner, 1988, 1991, 1992). With autobiographical narrative the individual presents his story by interpreting the events and interaction he has experienced and constructs his self, his world and culture, by attributing them with meaning. The biography does not exist per se, as the simple product of accumulated events organised in the memory, but it has the function of connecting individuals to their culture of belonging, positioning them in accordance with a social system consisting of roles, values, beliefs and ideologies. This connection provides the first opportunity to recompose the fragmented reflexive biographies which are typical of postmodernity. Narration is therefore not the act of an independent autonomous actor, as it mirrors knowledge and values which are socially shared, in as much as the intelligibility of the story depends on its cultural context: the culture is speaking through the actor, using the actor to reproduce itself. Further, we found that self-narratives depend on the mutual sharing of symbols, socially acceptable performances, and continued negotiation. Finally, we found that narratives typically require the interweaving of identities, and, thus, the support of others within the social sphere of interaction. In these various senses, then, the telling of the story is not so much the act of an independent individual as the result of a mutually coordinated and supportive relationship. As we now shift our attention to lived narratives, the self as independent entity disappears and is replaced by fully relational forms (Gergen, Gergen, 1981). It is fundamental to observe the way in which individuals make use of these meanings, by focusing on actions and expressions and consequently the context in which this process takes place, conducting retrospective research. Individuals work out a concept of the self not only through the interpretation that they develop with regard to themselves, but also in reference to the definitions that others transmit to them about this entity. As we mentioned previously, identity is an image of ourselves that we produce internally and that is consolidated through interaction and relations with others.

In addition, the self is strongly influenced by each person's culture of belonging; to this end Jerome Bruner speaks about the historical self, a self which is constantly changing as the subject collects, interprets and re-evaluates what his culture offers him while he constructs it (Bruner, 1988, 1991, 1992). Here lies the importance of (auto)biographical work: it makes it possible to detect meanings attributed by individuals to events and in general to reality within specific cultural contexts (Bruner, 1988, 1991, 1992). The concept of narrative lies at the heart of this tendency for storytelling and biography, but it should not be seen merely as the narrator's account of a past or present experience. Narrative is a form in which experience is represented and recounted, in which

events are presented as having a meaningful and coherent order in which activities are described along with the experience associated with them and the significance that lends them their sense for the persons involved (Good, 1994). We organise our experience and the memory of what has happened to us above all in the form of stories: the structure of language and the structure of thought eventually become inextricable. Our experience of human affairs tends to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about them (Bruner, 1991). We should point out here that for the purposes of use in a social study the story cannot be a mere juxtaposition of events or a chronicle; there must also be description, explanation, an assessment of the situations and connections and relations between protagonists and events (see Bertaux, 1998).

In addition to being an actor, man is also the co-author of his story: we all construct the latter together with others through our relations with them. Each subject is at the same time the protagonist of his own story and a character, with greater or lesser importance, in the stories experienced and acted by others. Through narrative the individual has the opportunity to establish a form of control over the world by defining and modifying his position in it: he can constantly reinvent himself through his story. With the construction of stories, from childhood onwards, there are the exciting experiences of freely arranging materials to create and affirming one's own identity and autonomy (Paolicchi, 1994). This means being responsible for one's own actions and experiences that are used to construct a narratable life (*ibidem*). The image of the self therefore emerges from the same subject's biography, from the way in which he confirms and revises his story in order to give meaning to his relations with others and future plans. Therefore, the self is not something static or a substance, but the configuration of personal events in a narrative flow that not only includes what we have been but also forecasts of what we will be. The subject is driven to narrate his story by the need to identify himself and be identifiable. It is for this reason that he highlights personal aspects that he has in common with other individuals: the subject seeks and recreates shared characteristics which tell others what type of person he is in a sufficiently clear way. This enables him to identify himself as part of a culture, a people and an ideology (Ricoeur, 1989). These forms of identification and recognition are integrated into the reflexivity and auto-reflexivity of modern biographies, limiting their underlying risks.

## Conclusions

The perception on a number of fronts of the need to recover the narrative dimension can be read as a response to a situation of crisis in contemporary society. One of the symptoms of this crisis, which has now become structural, is the progressive liquidity that characterises the current moment of major transformations that many define as postmodernity. It is a response for different recipients: narrators, listeners and seekers.

Narrators avoid or sideline the risk whereby an individual not narrated by others or unable to narrate himself becomes an outsider in what Bauman emblematically calls the individualized society, as articulation of life stories is the activity through which meaning and purpose are inserted into life (Bauman, 2001). Additionally, in this way it is possible to reduce the fragmentary nature that characterises current biographies to some extent, recovering sense and meaning for one's own experiences and identity, and managing to recognise oneself and be recognised through one's personal social identity.

Listeners take part in an eminently social relationship where the narrator's fragmentary identity is recomposed and act as active contributors to the process whereby an individual identity becomes social. Listeners therefore also construct their own social identities.

Researchers who use narratives solicited either directly or indirectly find themselves in a somewhat privileged position from which or within which it is possible to observe and understand (in the Weberian sense) the relation between individual and society and the way that they mutually reproduce themselves.

The decisive confirmatory trait with regard to the opportunities that do-it-yourself biographies have to find meaning, recognition and some form of knitting together of their constituent fragments can be ascribed to the practice of narration, seen as stories heard, stories listened to, stories read, the hermeneutics of what is seen and what happens to us and others, interpretations (Batini, Del

Sarto, 2005). A clear sign of all this can be found in these natural forms of narrative, but also (and perhaps especially) in those situations where the sharing of narrative is more structured: groups for mutual self-help, discussion and self-awareness or groups for behavioural control, stress support and prevention, social action against marginalisation, personal growth and self-fulfilment (Levy, 2000). These groups are growing in number and are multidisciplinary, with a wide variety of objectives, but are joined by the common denominator of narrative and narrating oneself to others.

The de-institutionalization of biographies and life paths, and the fact that they are increasingly exposed to deviations with increasingly uncertain transient routes makes the need for sharing and mutual recognition fairly strong and urgent. This is because the more uncertainty is shared among individuals, the more bearable it becomes, and narrative carries out precisely this function of sharing and restoring or discovering lost meaning.

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