

Life stories as a formative exercise for old women

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Abstract. Starting from the idea that autobiography can be a way of caring-for-oneself – understood as an opportunity to rethink and re-engineer oneself at any age, this contribution will underscore the pedagogical potential of autobiographical narration as an existentially deliberate formative exercise capable of restoring a desire for ulteriority even at an age nearing the end of life. Specifically, an experiment carried out among elderly women was carried out as part of the “places and forms of care” workshop.

Keywords. Autobiography, life stories, old women, care, narration

1. An introduction

Western culture has always characterized the images of “old men” and “old women” in different ways. *Female old age* in particular has been ambiguously represented with opposite and contradictory images, often depicted simultaneously with contempt and abandonment or veneration and respect. Since antiquity, from the late Middle Ages through the modern age up until today, the “old woman” has sometimes appeared in pictorial depictions, novels, and historical narratives, as the repository of wisdom and knowledge, sometimes as decrepit and malignant “crone”, and sometimes even as a witch with evil powers¹.

At the crossroads between virtuous idealization and demonization, between strength and weakness, between wisdom and madness, the figures of “old women” – and of “old women’s” bodies – have passed through the individual and collective imagination, helping to reinforce ambiguous and distorted ideas on old age.

Indeed, with respect to the self-representation of the “old” body, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, «For any individual, old age involves a decline that he fears. It contradicts the masculine or feminine idea adopted by young people and adults. The impulsive approach is to reject it in its most typical manifestations, incapacity, ugliness, infirmity. Even old age in others inspires immediate revulsion»².

Having said that, our first observation, which focuses on today, addresses the difficulty of women stopping the aging process. At present, due to today’s positive lifestyles, fitness and, especially, cosmetic procedures, i.e., the extraordinary development of reparative surgery, women have smooth skin and ease of movement along the lines of

¹ Cf. L. Passerini, *La fontana della giovinezza*, Giunti, Firenze 1999.

² De Beauvoir S., *La terza età*, Torino, Einaudi, 1971, p.45.

those traits typical of “adult” women, i.e., still far from being accepted – and accepting themselves – as “old women”.

On the basis of this reasoning, there are many who emphasize the contradictions between still appearing physically young, yet being very psychologically fragile. Nevertheless, it should be added that being and feeling not-yet-elderly – thus escaping the canonical image of the “old woman” – protects and improves these same cognitive skills in addition to the affective and relational aspects.

So let us talk about elderly women who are aware of the problematic nature of those distinctions that must occasionally be taken into account.

The fact that it is possible to live well at all ages – and consequently, even in old age – does not erase the image many women have of experiencing the state of being elderly as disorienting and existentially uncertain, when not of truly isolating in segregated spaces. Evidence of this has increased in both socio-anthro-pedagogical studies as well as a literary survey of works in which conflicts, anxieties, and creative redefinitions of the self emerge.

It is obvious that any discussion of elderly women should be interpreted and placed within the broader paradigm of old age, which includes men as well as women and leads to thoughts on children, young people, and adults in addition to education, culture, and the worlds of work and leisure

Having clarified certain assumptions and highlighted the need for a problematical, interdisciplinary interpretative approach, the problem’s pedagogical aspect must be highlighted.

In this regard, it must be mentioned that neurobiological research has irrefutably clarified the open evolutivity of the brain/mind, which continues to grow and be transformed until the end as it assumes ever new configurations even when there are limitations. All this is providing that a real existential plan has been set in motion that supports the physical and mental creation of full human potential from an early age.

Nevertheless, how can an aging person find meaning and purpose with a diminished social role when the body is undergoing great changes, and when the passing of time marks, not merely one’s face, but also one’s heart, desires, and hopes? How new ways of being and becoming be successfully devised without giving in to despondency and despair?

One possibility is the (trans)formative power of autobiographical memory, which *becomes* a permanent formative (and caring) action throughout one’s entire lifelong, not just in its duration and scope but particularly in its depth³. Therefore, it is as an existentially formative practice able to elicit the possibility of restoring sense and meaning to the elderly perspective. Thus, it is recognition of sense and meaning to all generations seeing that segregation in old age implies and involves a loss of history, memory, culture, and life⁴.

³ Cf. L. Dozza, *Apprendere pere tutta la vita, nei differenti contesti della vita, in modo profondo*, in “Pedagogia-piùdidattica”, 1, gennaio 2009, pp. 29-34.

⁴ Cf. M. Ladogana, *Progettare la vecchiaia. Una sfida per la pedagogia*, Bari, Progedit, 2016.

2. Recounting one's life as a learning experience

Jerome Bruner focused on the intersubjective and transitive value of narration, highlighting the social character of memory and the ability of stories to create continuous (re)configurations of identity⁵.

Stories make sense of human experiences in the world and create a temporal link between present-past and present-future. Memory has well-defined boundaries, and the future a plan to be carried out⁶.

According to narrative thought, the mind favors the construction of stories as the models for interpreting reality. Through narration, we attribute meaning to our past, our present, as well as our future, transforming the experience into a coherent story. The narrative self then rebuilds its own evolutionary experiences by giving them direction, sense, and meaning, placing them in a specific historical-cultural context, and giving "narrative format" to the internal and external worlds, making them more ordered and less chaotic.

In short, as Franco Cambi has pointed out, narrative thinking at any age is «the thought of sense and of possibility»⁷.

Old age therefore becomes the place to integrate being. It is this stage of life when one truly accepts oneself, examining the very existential project in which narration is recognized and rediscovered to remembering (putting the rediscovered parts of the past together into a storyline) and re-constructing the most profound and authentic meaning of the overall biography. Moreover, in "untangling the threads" of one's own existence, whoever is telling the story, feels that a sense of having lived. Enthusiasm for the past is transformed into a desire for further life, allowing an evolutionary reconstructive process to begin.

It then becomes possible to recognize for every woman, even in old age, a meaning and a purpose (but which should not be an addendum to the meanings and purposes of earlier ages). In addition, I believe it becomes possible to do so by highlighting the (trans)formative power of the ever generative autobiographical memory of the self's creative process. By reconstructing everyday-life experiences and events, together with the ability to investigate and reinterpret them by giving them a sense and a *different* meaning, pedagogically take shape as a permanent educational action involving the entire course of an individual life⁸.

Moreover, this narrative survey of one's own biography is important for bringing out those hidden aspects of one's own self from which the reorganization of a personal existential project can arise, going further and experimenting with surprising, new meanings in a space suspended between the *here* (of the story) and the *then* (of recollection and memory).

⁵ Cf. J. Bruner, *La ricerca del significato*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1992.

⁶ Id.

⁷ F. Cambi, *Saperi e competenze*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2004, p. 78.

⁸ Cf. D. Sarsini (ed.), *Percorsi dell'autobiografia. Tra memoria e formazione*, Milano, Unicopli, 2005.

3. Growing old through remembrances, memories, and, reconstructions

If it is difficult for each person to accept aging, it is even more so for women as the female identity is strongly linked to the bodily integrity that inevitably deteriorates with the passage of time.

However, through self-narration, elderly women have the opportunity to exercise those linguistic tools crucial for activating their own skills for construction and identity transformation. By *untangling* this life story and, at the same time, *reconstructing* it, the act of narration restores dignity to the existence of whoever is telling the story and also brings out those implicit, “unsaid” stories that mark each individual life story, revealing all the formative significance through the story.

Specifically, stories about oneself are necessary for the positive self-representation of aging women who need to restore an existential dignity to the condition of being elderly, counteracting the exclusively negative connotation that has long been assigned to them.

For older women, remembering thus means cultivating the possibility of being able to still be. «Reappropriating the narration of our life story means having a place to think about the future, not in terms of a retreat to surviving, but of being able to act and of where to discover abilities, confront limits, ask questions, rediscover forgotten or interrupted expectations, and cope with one’s own pains, illnesses, and infirmities»⁹.

The personal life stories of older women express a profound value on the condition of *becoming old* and the possibility of inventing new words and meanings. For example, choosing to tell negative stories means having the opportunity to restructure them, modifying their favorable interpretation, and reducing their influence on a person, in the same way that narrating positive events is highly gratifying and encouraging. Having lost their most intimate, familial, affective, and companionable connections, elderly women have the opportunity through the act of *remembering* to reconstruct relationships and habits, reformulate the way of living one’s own time in a condition different from the past, and recover new ways of taking care (of oneself and of others through oneself).

«Real self-care, truly taking care of oneself by making peace with one’s own memories begins when [...] the present that flows day after day, adding other experiences, [...] comes into the picture. It becomes a fertile place for inventing or revealing other ways of feeling, observing, examining, and recording the world inside and outside of us»¹⁰.

The pedagogical intent of *remembering* personal life stories through narration allows the elderly woman to develop her identity. In fact, self-narration *again speaks* to the elderly woman, encouraging contact with the world, placing her before life’s problems, enabling her to wish for the future, and strengthening her imaginative ability. It lets her place herself consciously inside her own story, by recognizing herself “at” (that) age.

Moreover, using narratives with older women creates a constructive relationship between the narrator and the listener that encourages “areas of mutual understanding” within which to take action to reduce stereotypes and prejudices towards the construc-

⁹ R. Cima, *Pratiche narrative per una pedagogia dell’invecchiare*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012, p. 102.

¹⁰ D. Demetrio, *Raccontarsi. L’autobiografia come cura di sé*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 1996, p. 15.

tion of a thought that knows no constraints or boundaries and is open the discovery of new future horizons.

However, the narrative always contains a relationship aspect. One's life story and its audience can give voice, bring out, and spark a dialogue with one's own self and with the other. It is a game that cannot be played alone. Moreover, it proves effective when the narration meets with someone who knows how to listen and, in turn, to tell a story that, in intersecting, becomes universal.

The educational effectiveness of telling a life story is therefore closely linked to the capacity of the researcher (educator/trainer) to prepare the most suitable conditions to facilitate and promote talking about oneself, moving in the relationship space between «*Erfahrungsraum*» (experiential space) and «*Erwartungshorizont*» (horizon of expectation) that are the “conditions of the possibility of stories. Experience as past present and expectation as a presentiated future»¹¹ must be made available to attentive, participatory yet unobtrusive audience, which induces the narrator to abandon all doubts and overcome the discomfort, embarrassment, and resistance to baring one's soul. In fact, the self-narration experience used with the elderly requires a well-developed ability to listen and to pay close attention, together with an ability to decipher moods, emotions, and feelings that are unknown (because they have not yet been experienced) and with which it is more difficult to identify. The story of older women –narration in general – is therefore modulated on the interlocutor's listening ability.

Telling one's own story is an experience that addresses the past, takes place in the present, and, in a certain way, stretches towards the future.

Having lived longer, an elderly woman has more things to remember and, therefore, to tell (and to re-formulate). The narrative act allows her to weave a fabric of relationships with the listener, to develop sociality, and to arrive at the “creation of knowledge about oneself and one's own world”.

Consequently, a productive process of meaning and identity is carried out in this interaction between the self and others, through the listening that acts as a go-between in the story of oneself, profoundly transforming it and steering it towards new ways of constructing and reconstructing one's own life, by hearing it, by recounting it.

Moreover, this retelling of emotions, anxieties, and hopes; of wounds and joys; of shortcomings and individuals requires an emotional consonance (between the narrator and the listener) that facilitates the expression of particularly valuable and meaningful content.

4. Re-formulating

It is said that the experience of telling stories and of telling about oneself is done in a significant space within which to carry out that reformulation, renewal, and reconstruction of events and past experiences into a generative self-restructuring of viewpoints as well as of new and original perspectives.

Even more, it returns a way of speaking to individuals who have too often been pushed into linguistic taboos and risk losing the communicative capacity and, with it, relationships, speaking with and thinking about others, and encouraging the deve-

¹¹ R. Koselleck, *Futuro e passato. Per una semantica dei tempi storici*, Clueb, Bologna 2007, p. 56.

lopment of the ability to become the narrator of one's own story (one's own life) by finding new sense, direction, and meaning¹².

Certainly, telling personal stories to others generates strong feelings of fear and confusion, sometimes of happiness, but more often of melancholy and confusion. However, if older women can express these emotions, giving them form through a story, a photograph, or a piece of music, it then becomes possible to counter that sense of lost identity tied to the difficulty of creating and defining oneself in the midst of psychological, physical, and affective changes and transformations.

The narrative act revives memories, brings back plans and parts of oneself "lost along the way". Each old woman finds aspects in her stories with which she can still identify herself and others that will feel distant from her own way of being.

Nonetheless, for researchers/educators/trainers, embarking on a journey into personal stories means experimenting with a different way of approaching and observing the world, and of thinking about it as an open form tied to a logic of possibility and to a project to liberate one's own intellectual and creative potentialities and unconventional judgment. Alternatively, it means elderly women must experiment with new ways of getting to know or recognize themselves more profoundly, expressing those generative potentialities that they possess, without sometimes being aware of them. Then the stories, narrated and heard, create a movement that takes care not only of the old women but also of those who listen to them.

In education, it is thus a priority to revive storytelling and to use it creatively, extolling the inexhaustible human richness offered by the generative power of the word (as well as of images, sounds, gestures...). In addition, re-launching the pedagogical potentiality of narration offers a repertoire of possibles and not-yets, which is configured as an indispensable tool in "educating for the future".

5. Emblematic elderly life stories

As has been said, if old age does not necessarily imply irreversible destructurations but is instead the result of an open evolutionary process in constantly alternating phases of crisis and redesigning of existential completeness, the supporting role for deliberate educational activities clearly emerges.

Among the more distinct formative activities carried out on the basis of a well-considered pedagogical approach aimed specifically at educating the elderly and the very elderly is an experiment with older women carried out by the pedagogical research group of the University of Foggia.

The basic idea is that an autobiographical survey in old age lets «our life, experiences, and knowledge [be interpreted] with new eyes that open up to unexpected and surprising perspectives and which fascinate us each time we discover them»¹³. It is an

¹² Cf. F. Pinto Minerva, *Narrazioni tra memoria e futuro*, in F. Pinto Minerva (ed.), *La memoria del Parco. Il Parco della memoria. Ambiente, ricerca, formazione*, Progedit, Bari 2011, pp. 3-9; id., *La vecchiaia. Sguardi pedagogici*, in M. Baldacci, F. Frabboni, F. Pinto Minerva (eds.), *Continuare a crescere. L'anziano e l'educazione permanente*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2012, pp. 39-59; id. (ed.), *Sguardi incrociati sulla vecchiaia*, Pensa, Lecce 2015.

¹³ M. Ammaniti, *La curiosità non invecchia. Elogio della quarta età*, Mondadori, Milano 2017, p. 116.

archaeological, emotional, commemorative, and creative effort that is configured as a generative space for possible reconstructions of a sense of self to bring old age out from isolation and “bring it back” into learning.

5.1 Places and forms of care

As part of the “Places and Forms of Care” training program (included in the wider interregional mobility and social/health services professional training project, funded by the European Union under the patronage of the Puglia Region and the University of Foggia, organized by the L. Einaudi Institute of Higher Education in Foggia during the 2016-17 academic year), I had the opportunity to conduct a workshop for some elderly guests at a rehabilitation facility in Foggia.

The pedagogical view refers to an integrated educational system among schools, universities, and local private/public institutions, each with a specific point of view on training, which have moved towards an integral and integrated formation of the person.

The key word around which the workshop revolved (which saw its theoretical and practical aspects successfully come together in a specialized facility for the elderly) was *narration* as a form of *self-care*. It defined an “alternative” approach towards the elderly capable of establishing a radical re-evaluation of how old age is no longer perceived and understood in exclusively detractive terms.

It was an experience that sought to explore through autobiographical interviews the experiences of the elderly in the diversity of their life stories. Specifically, four interviews were conducted over four weeks with each of the participants, between the ages of 76 and 82 years.

The interviews touched on four categories:

- feelings and emotions,
- training and work,
- free time, and
- loss and alienation

In reconstructing their existential experiences, in their reinterpretation and redirection, the elderly interviewees had the opportunity to focus on the existing limits to the further evolution of their own stories of formation and transformation.

The intent was to bring out the depth and complexity characterizing the wealth of the knowledge and skills of these old people who, unfortunately, are very often completely unknown to the world of young people and adults. Also unappreciated by these same age groups are the existential demands, needs, and material desires of old age (from those related to the times and places of everyday life, to those concerning the rhythms and ways of interpersonal relationships, up to those connected with psycho-physical health care needs).

The heart of this investigation was in giving organicity to what emerged from the autobiographical narratives, where the latter allowed, on the one hand, reflecting on the outcomes of the activities offered to the elderly (and on their approval index). On the other hand, possible future educational actions were contextualized, starting specifically from respecting their needs for personal fulfillment – namely, their need to “maintain” an existential integrity, too often denied and shattered by life experiences.

The participants contributed enthusiastically to the activities and conveyed how the

action of telling their stories helped to reconstruct a complete and harmonious picture – unexpected and sometimes forgotten – of their respective life stories as well as to increase their self-esteem and their awareness of how much they are and can still be. In particular, they gave back to the researchers the awareness of being able to continue to fully inhabit a day that, for years marked by work rhythms, suddenly appears free and, paradoxically, also “without a purpose”.

The problem – says Antonina, born in 1940 – is not in deciding what to do but in finding a new purpose now that I’m old and in how to feel useful in a daily routine that seems bleak.

She gladly talks about herself and tries to understand how much of everything she has done in life can be retrieved and reinterpreted with the physicality, intelligence, and awareness of an undeniably *different* age.

Initially, there were a great many who were uninterested in talking about their own experiences. Hence Filomena, born in 1936, states,

For me, this story of talking about myself is just a nuisance because I just don’t like chit-chatting or talking, I really don’t want to remember. It’s useless.

Then she changed her mind. The most painful passages of a life, touched only fleetingly in the beginning, were expressed in their completeness together with the deepening trust that the researcher managed to gain in their relationship. Hints of plans also emerged and took shape.

And then she warmly recounted,

I remember one day when I was a child. I went to work in the fields with my father and went off to play with my dog. My father left without me and only realized I wasn’t there when he got home. There were no cars at that time. The following morning they found me asleep, hugging my dog. Since then I’ve loved animals more than people. It’d be great for me if they brought me a dog today. But they don’t allow it in the institute. I could look after and take care of it. Maybe I’d be happy again, even at this age. I would astonish everyone if they gave me a dog.

In Filomena’s words, a sudden emotional rush towards the future revitalizes her, infusing her with an enthusiasm that lets her, in some way, renegotiate times, roles, and actions as well as glimpse otherwise unimaginable meanings and perspectives. Born in 1942, the confident and vivacious Bettina is in love with life.

A couple of times a year, my daughter picks me up in Foggia and takes me with her to Messina for a few days. I enjoy the unexpected happiness of a short walk, a concert, a water-ice.... It’s lovely! I realize that, at my age, I’m still amazingly in love with life.

Listening to her, it is clear that Bettina knows how to act her age. She recognizes and appreciates it for what it is in that time and place in which its amazing splendor is revealed.

The elderly phenomenologies emerging from this autobiographical survey, that “common matrix” of thoughts, fears, anxieties, and desires, acquire a profound interpretive and transformational poignancy. They themselves have been configured as an “access key” to new theoretical developments and empirical discoveries useful for

influencing contemporary society to also proactively solve the “old age” problem in its multidimensionality, (not being limited to merely re-acting). Thus, they become a powerful and profound metaphor through which the opportunity is given to interpret the most varied social and cultural interactions.

Each old woman is reflected in a unique narrative. Listening to it, one has a direct understanding of the pieces of a story that is never just personal. The fragments of stories narrated and heard become visible, going beyond the intimate and private space of memory to be outwardly welcomed. Consequently, one ends up learning something about *that particular* old woman and her existential aspect in addition to old age in general.

Specifically, it is a matter of going beyond *that* specific micro-story, drawing from it strategies and procedures by transforming the existing macro-story. *That* earlier world in which the elderly lived restores a clear picture of a tangible present (of the here and now) by laying bare the device that historically has arisen as an anthropological, sociological, and even pedagogical apriorities, perpetuating mechanisms that exclude old age from any further form of living¹⁴.

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¹⁴ Cf. G. Annacontini, *Macchine sociali ed evidenze pedagogiche: il paradigma “vecchiaia”*, in F. Pinto Minerva (ed.), *La memoria del Parco. Il Parco della memoria* (pp. 24-46), Bari, Progedit, 2011; Id., M. Ladogana, *Le interviste biografiche. La quarta età*, in M. Baldacci, F. Frabboni, F. Pinto Minerva (eds.), *Continuare a crescere. L'anziano e l'educazione permanente* (pp. 161-192), Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012.

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