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Adaptive and transformative biographical learning: how do middle-aged women represent their learning lives?

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Introduction

This paper discusses the ways in which women aged 50, from contrasting cultural contexts, narrate their life course, with particular reference to relationships and events that have enabled and constrained their learning and self-development. Their representations reflect complex sets of motivations, beliefs and dispositions towards learning and their own capabilities for taking action to change their situations (Evans & Waite, 2013).

The focus of the paper connects to the SCUTREA 2019 theme in two important ways.

First of all, learning in adult life is conceived as a way to improve life chances actively and also as a way to transform life; by a (critical) revision of acting and meaning, a form of self-consciousness can reveal dimensions of self, motivations, beliefs, attitudes, life points of view and changes. This conceptualization connects with the theme of the transformative power of adult learning, critically shaped and reworked over the past century (Mezirow, 1978). The development in adult life may be understood as a learning process that requires a transformation in a way we think and act, demanding constantly to construct and maintain identity and to learn to live with others in a changing world and open to emancipative dimensions (Brookfield, 2011).

The second point of connection lies in the biographies of the research participants themselves. Narratives is the way adults reflect on their own life, finding forms of self-learning where time and experience are understood and managed in order to define life trajectories and to implement a continuous sense-making. Using Narrative, adults can re-orientate their lives, checking their learning, reflecting on personal identity, weaving dialogues and finding powerful connections (Goodson et al., 2010). Born in the 1950s, their life experiences and trajectories are rooted in, and intertwined with, 20th century post-war changes in both UK and Italy in the social organization of initial schooling, access to higher education and the availability of learning opportunities later in life (Rönka et al., 2003). Furthermore, their biographies are reflective of the frameworks of power and control that produce gender relations they and have shaped their adult life development over the same period (Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005).

The paper investigates how learning can play a crucial role in interpreting and acting women's lives. Biographical Learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991) are useful frameworks to conceptualize the links between life course trajectories and learning lives.

Research questions are: How do middle-aged women represent their learning lives? What are their learning trajectories? What is the role (or the impact) of learning in the transformation of their life patterns?

Research method

The methodological approach is qualitative; in-depth interviews with a sample of UK and Italian women are the method for generating descriptions and interpretations on how women in their 50s learn from their own lives (Tedder & Biesta, 2007), revealing different propensities to reflect on their life experiences.

The first data source is a selected sample of 220 semi-standardized interviews of the longitudinal research National Child Development Study that investigate biographies of people born in UK in one specific week in 1958. During the interviews, covering 5 main topics and conducted in England, Scotland and Wales, respondents were asked to choose from 8 different types of life course diagrams that best represented their life trajectories or to sketch them. The sub-sample considered is limited to female population (110) and to the last topic of the interview (life stories and identities). In this paper, we consider 31 interviews with women that have drawn a personal diagram representing their life course.

The second data source is a set of 28 interviews with Italian women in their 50s living in the North East of Italy, in the Veneto area, based on the same items of the UK interview and requiring an outline of the life course.

The nature of the comparison between UK and Italian narratives and sketches is not focused on measuring differences between two groups (Ritchie et al., 2014); it is aimed to explore emergent themes in the accounts of different groups and contexts. The main focus is the way UK and Italian women at the age of fifty represent their learning trajectories. Diagrams are powerful tools in the research process because they provide an alternative way to explore the subject of the study, generating potential impulses in sense-making.

The diversity of the groups is recognized, considering the multiple influences of macroeconomic conditions, social and institutional structures characterizing the two countries. The goal is to explore, in the narrative or in the graphical representation of the life course, different ways in which learning is taken into account as a key event of the life pattern.

In this paper, we have selected some interviews – 2 UK and 2 Italian – that are not representative but demonstrative as a summary exemplification of the different perception of the role of learning in respondent's life trajectories.

Thematic, linguistic and narrative analysis of the transcription with Nvivo enables an exploration of how and why learning can play a crucial role in transforming women lives. The validity of the results is verified by a continuous process of discussion and by a comparative analysis conducted by the two authors both separately and together. The close cross-cultural collaboration of the researchers facilitates mutual learning and understandings of the socio-cultural context of the two countries and the elicitation of the meaning of the tellers' stories in the interviews. A shared commitment in the reflection on women's narratives is sensitivity to their situatedness in place and time.

Findings: learning lives

Different expressions of the role of learning in the women's life course emerged from the accounts. There were three main configurations:

Low	simply chronological examination of the learning episodes as a part of the life course
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Medium	analysis, from a retrospective point of view, of the role of learning experiences in the life course
High	active identification, according to a reflective and critical enquiry, of the impact of learning as a key event of the life course.

Eight recurrent milestones arose from narratives of UK and Italian women, composing differently the 'life palettes' that shaped their life course. These markers were usually used as reference points to define the shape of life, even if with some differences in the two countries (Evans & Biasin, 2017, 21):

1	To have/lose a baby
2	To go/leave school
3	To have faith
4	To have good/not good relations with parents and family
5	To have good/not good personal family health
6	To change/lose job
7	To have/separate from partner
8	To have/have not a social/cultural life

In the accounts, learning is considered as a key event in two different ways: in a narrow perspective, it is an educational outcomes, a school performance or a qualification achieved or failed (marker 2); in a broader perspective, it is an outcome of a professional course, a cultural/personal interest or a form of learning recognized by others or derived from life experiences (marker 8).

These women have often used the answers to the questions posed as a form of memory of their past, to focus the attention on themselves, to put in order events of their story, to identify the meaning of (part of) their lives. Key events have also permitted, in this specific time of the life course (Stewart, 2001), to achieve a form of retrospective self-evaluation in considering failures, successful experiences, moments of pain, discouragement and happiness, or in bearing in mind the loss of loved ones and the moments of new beginning. The explicit questions 'What have I learned from my life?' or 'How and when have I learned this?' do not emerge from the accounts as a definitive form of Narrative Learning (Goodson et al., 2010). However, in some participants, a form of reflection on learning seems to be the natural conclusion of the interview, having its focus on personal/social identity.

Diagrams enable visualisations of life trajectories. Events such as marriage, birth of children, divorce, death of parents usually find space both in the Italian and UK diagrams, while learning episodes or school/training experiences are indicated as less important visual markers in the general life shape.

In this paper we consider some UK and Italian interviews where respondents look at the role of learning in their lives in two polarized ways. At one pole, learning is a part of the puzzle of life but it has not generated an active and reflective attitude towards themselves or others, neither seems to generate specific attitudes towards the living context. At the other pole, learning introduces a form of consciousness that women develop as a critical reflection on the specific shape of their lives. There is a specific linkage with self-awareness in interviews where women are able to manage the connection between learning and self-development. This correlation is not associated to the level of education

attained but it is connected to the ability to reflect critically and retrospectively on one's own life, finding meaning or analysing meaning perspectives through narration.

Therefore, women with a high level of initial education have sometimes not considered learning as an important marker in their lives; while women with a low or medium level of instruction have perceived learning as a means to improve their lives or as an emancipative and transformative boost. Personality traits, family background, social conditions and gender regimes in the two countries also play an important role in this awareness.

In the high-level configuration, women talk explicitly of learning experiences and recognize competences obtained in formal or non-formal contexts; narratives reveal a clear awareness of the role of learning in life choices and of the impact of it in professional paths.

In the selected UK case (n.27UK), the woman rebuilds her story starting from the relationships with parents (the divorce, the grandparents' figure) and from the husband (the first meeting, the support in family life). She refers to her educational curriculum, justifying the 'love for the school' not because an intrinsic reason: 'I enjoyed every minute of my school years, whether that was 'cause of my home. I wasn't at home [...] It wasn't a happy time when I lived with my dad and my stepmother).'

She left school at 16, got a job in a bank, and married at 22. She had two sons and she's stayed at home until the boys went to school. The gender regime is further indicated with this expression: 'I worked in a supermarket and did the twilight shifts, stacking shelves, that was good fun 'cause we were all young mothers, all in the same boat'. Her need to learn emerges when she reflect about her identity and her future perspectives: 'I thought, oh god, what do I do now, you know, I am not a house proud person, I couldn't clean every day, I thought, oh god, what am I going to do? So, I went back to the college and did a BTec National Diploma, A level equivalent in science'. When she was enrolled in school, she also changed job (in a microbiology lab, salesperson in a bank, receptionist in an optician shop), balancing with great difficulty study, family life and work. She perceived that learning could improve her life and offer her a search for meaning, not necessarily a potential gain in earning money. An important turning point is narrated:

I used to teach patients how to take contact lenses in and out [...] Enjoyed that. And then the optician decided to send myself and the other [...] on a contact lens course [...] it was very theoretical, to me it was brilliant, I lapped it up every minute of it [...] I need to do something more, it sort of really sparked this all back up again, so I got back to work and he said 'How was the course?' 'Brilliant, I want to be an optician now'.

The need to enroll at university occurred to her when she was driving back home after visiting her son, enrolled at university:

I thought that's the last time I'm going to come over here [...] and I just thought, I'm going to do a degree. Got home, {Partner} said, 'Glass of wine?' I said, 'Yes please [...], I'm going to do a degree' 'Well I think that's bloody marvelous'. So, I did my degree, so my son [...] doing his degree and I was doing my degree.

Learning is associated to a positive enhancement and it contributes to empower her in taking decisions in crucial transformation of meaning perspectives through how she looks at her life. The later decision to do a PhD is also based on the motivation to increase her low self-esteem and self-confidence for a better life.

In the Italian case selected (n.6IT), the woman starts telling how difficult her infancy was (raised by an anxious grandmother because parents worked far from home, with a mother very oppressive and rigid in imposing rules and values, solitude and isolation from classmates). School experiences were the best and very educational events she remembers, given that they compensate negative family experiences.

My teacher was an elderly and charismatic woman that helped me to gain in self-esteem and to build up my confidence [...] Also junior school professors were important for my self-development because they helped me in express my personality as a group leader [...] and I have excellent academic results.

Also, her husband is defined as a person that influenced (harmfully) her life because he was able to impose on her his passions, hobbies, sports, friends, behaviors. Two learning experiences emerge from the accounts as very important for her: learning to be a mother, facing her new role with freedom to be, remembering the passion and the positivity that she knew during her period of schooling; learning at work and improving her professional career 'I feel very motivated at work, I have many job satisfaction, I learn every day something new about job, about collaboration with others, about me.' Learning is considered as a form of rescue, a safety that permits her to find spaces to transform, giving purpose to her life; it appears the way that provides open possibilities to be detached from her family story and to the educational model of her 'dark childhood' because it permits her to elaborate past experiences with a new meaning perspective: 'feeling a lot of joy in my life.'

Two interviews are selected from the sample as expression of a low level where learning is not associated to a form of awareness or self-discovery, but it is considered as a burden or an obligation to carry out without connections with training, work or personal identity.

In the UK interview selected (n.54UK), the woman considers learning as a phenomenon restricted to childhood and to formal instruction. Even if she affirms her love for school, she reports an episode that is a key (emotional) event connected to learning: 'I just loved school. I was bullied by two girls but not at the secondary [...] these two girls that had tormented me my whole life through school since I was five, came up to me and went 'I like your boots' 'I'll see you at four' and I had a big fight. She left school at 16 because 'I wanted money and I wanted to work [...] I'd probably been a cookery teacher. I like cooking.' Learning was not appreciated as a way to achieve her goal and then to empower her but evaluated as an instrumental good. Telling the story about various jobs, she explains that she's 'naturally talented in selling and in having a conversation with anybody, with a total stranger.' Learning is perceived as an intellectual and nonconcrete way do to things: 'I am a can-do person.' She's totally focused on her job: 'I spent all my times in my work, all with people in work' even though her daughter was extremely ill for a long time. She is more reactive than reflexive about her life:

Well, I'm 51 in March [...] I've got to be at least three quarters of the way through. But you don't feel it, because in there you're still 23. In your head you're still 23. You don't feel [...] I walked past a mirror in a shop the other day and I thought it was my mum [...] and that's the weirdest feeling.

The Italian case selected (n.15IT) presents some similarities with the UK one. The woman describes herself as a 'little girl who didn't like to go to school.' The approach to education is negative and she repeats many times that school sucked to her (but she didn't know

why) and many times she was escaping from school to get home. At 13, after the compulsory school, she works as a factory worker ('I didn't care if I flunked out of school, because I was only interested in working'). The interview is a chronological succession of events (the meeting with her husband, the wedding, the birth of the daughter and then the son, the sacrifices to build the house, daughter's illness, husband retirement, grown-up children, 'little' freedom from everyday life); she draws her life trajectory as a four-step staircase that synthesizes lifespan: from downs (school, family) to ups (tranquility, have a kitchen garden, take a walk around). Learning is not a part of her life and is not a good investment for enhancing her agency; it is associated to the 'worst years' of her life with no sense in her adult life.

Discussion and conclusion

Women's interviews analyzed show that learning is not strictly embedded to agency in adult life. Narratives explain that learning experiences can be generative and perceived as a booster of agency, as a platform where adult development can be shaped. Education can be a structural advantage because of knowledge, competences, attitudes that develop a transformative power in life. But Education can be also a disadvantage for future learning where is associated a negative experience and its impact affect the way adults understand themselves and their acting possibilities.

Retrospective accounts of lives reveal inner capabilities that are developed reflexively through experiences, relationships during the life course. The longitudinal perspective of retrospection can show the potential of learning in shaping the life course and in implementing a form of power to better achieve self-development. This self-development is not that of self-propelled autonomous individuals but essentially relational, with action and further learning potential stimulated through engagement with others. The narratives reveal aspects of the conditions and relationships through which women come to express their self-development. Such insights are often missing in assumptions about the self-determination and readiness for learning projects in adult life. Comparative reflections on these temporally embedded, retrospective accounts of lives shaped over half a century show how biographical negotiation confronts pre-given life worlds that are themselves reflective of gender regimes (Connell, 2009).

Variations in the ways in which women narrate how they move their lives forward reveal the potential for adult education to incorporate practices that can better support people towards the achievement of critical insight into their experiences, as the construction and narration of their stories becomes part of the learning process. Adult educators often hold preconceptions about the starting points for the activation of self-managed learning in adult life. Understanding, from the perspective of the women themselves, the role of activating events and relationships in the life-course indicates the importance, for adult education practitioners, of sensitivity to these variations and to the cultural embeddedness of the women's experiences.

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