

# Marginalisation as a process and the biographical approach

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The study of homelessness using biographical/life history methods marks the meeting point of two rhetorics: that which tells the story of poverty and marginalisation as “processes” and that which, given the good fortune that qualitative methods have met with following the crisis of sociological positivism, recommends (together with a variety of ‘qualitative’ methods) the biographical (and micro) approaches as a fundamental methodological resource. We recalled the consistency linking the two elements in the long paper: one fundamental reason why different research studies rely on life histories is the congruence that there is supposed to exist between the method and the process and multi-dimensional character of the phenomenon under study.

Biographical methods appear as a natural choice when dealing with the idea of poverty that has gained ground over the last twenty years: the process and multidimensional nature of poverty. Resort to interviews and life stories combines with a conceptual apparatus which places the emphasis on poverty and marginalisation as processes, and on the importance of the paths, chains and events that lead to poverty (Torri, Tosi 2004).

In that paper we stated the good reasons underlying the biographical approaches; here on the other hand we highlight the inconsistencies of the system of analysis on which the two rhetorics are based. The difficulties, also the practical difficulties of these lines of research reveal why the system of analysis “fails to work” from various viewpoints. We will do it by considering three of its limits: the general limits of biographical methods, the limits that derive from the micro character of the analysis, and those that derive from the reference to social exclusion theories. As expected, the arguments end up by confirming that the “value” of these methods is strongly dependent on the theoretical approaches adopted and on the ability to theoretically manage the questions raised by the method (in our long paper we raise the point with reference to the alternative individualisation/generalisation: convergent arguments are advanced by other papers for this workshop: see Borner Stax 2004 and Smith and Ravenhill 2004).

## **Biographical methods and text analysis**

Difficulties in applying the method may mean that it is unable to give what is expected from it, that it does not give what it promises. A critical point in the complex theoretical debate on the narrative methods regards the difficulties in managing the “construct” character of the stories/narrations. These difficulties risk inducing practices that conflict with the reasons for using the method, its “value” according to the researchers which adopt it. The stories narrated are subject to (re)construction by the narrator: they involve self-representations and rationalisations; they are occasions for self-reflection on one's life; they therefore pose the

problem of the relationship between history and memory, etc. As in general, the narration is a basis for self-representation and the representation of others, and for construction of identities, and the most common form to express the need to “set in order” one’s existence (Jedlowski 2000).

Personal biographies are [viewed as] narrative story constructs: definitions of themselves which people use because of the need to create a coherent life history, with which they account to themselves and others, and with which they identify themselves. This gives rise to the question, to what extent biographies are truthful... The researcher finds himself in the paradoxical situation of asking about the past, but hearing the actual reconstruction of it [...]. When looking back, some events are enlarged in the memory, while others are forgotten or hidden, and rationalisations and romanticisations are taking place. [...]. The life stories reflect their experiences and intentions, their actions and the consequences thereof. They constitute a reaction to the representations they handle, and the changes which have occurred in them in due course (van Doorn 2004).

These elements constitute narrations as “text”: this requires a hermeneutic approach and the interaction between the different viewpoints from which the text can be interpreted.

To tell about yourself is not a neutral act, unaffected by the identity of the teller, by the motivations with which you tell, and, finally, by the context in which it occurs [...]. You cannot treat reality as separate from the form it takes when it is recounted. Oral or written testimony must be considered as a complex text to be analysed on different levels, to be understood hermeneutically and its factual importance is marginal compared to the truth of the experience and of how it is told by the person concerned (Olagnero, Saraceno 1993, 50).

Now, the current (“scientific”) procedures/practices of empirical sociology – when and to the extent to which they are far from embracing the need for “reflexivity” implied in analysing texts - do not easily allow this path to be followed: they are rather inclined to enclose recounts within particular narrative schemes of some “scientific” or administrative type. Sociology itself is (built on) narration: sociologists weave and select and connect different events, according to specific theoretical frames. Of course, the type of frame make a difference. Some are more sensitive and able to make different narrations to interact and to meet the requirements of text analysis. But it matters that, as we have seen in the long paper, faced with re-constructions performed by interviewees, in most cases the researcher plays a strong role as ‘orders’ of the stories. Elements of the biographies (pieces of the narrations) are selected (the “important elements”, the “typical paths”) and ordered on the basis of an interpretative scheme (usually: to illustrate different stages of a process of marginalisation) which belongs to the scientific debate. By following this procedure the researcher risks on the one hand giving up the advantages of a plurality of narrative/reconstructions and on the other of contradicting one of the basic reasons adduced for using biographical methods: that of “seeing the point of view of the person studied”. Resort by researchers to their own criteria or to those of her/his reference framework may deny the existence of the “links” with which the interviewee gives/gave unity to his/her story.

“Order” on what basis, as a function of what? From this viewpoint the recount furnishes (merely) pointers which are then set in a sociological recount constructed on the basis of the themes subjects and interpretative schemes of the social sciences and which are presented/communicated according to scientific rhetorics.

Clearly the text nature makes the question of whether the narration is reliable, and of whether what is recounted is “true” or not, irrelevant or at least marginal. The point in question is not the “authenticity” of the biography recounted but its relationship with the social truths at stake in the construction of the problem. (“not the truth of being but the social being of truth: not whether the facts are real but what the policies of their interpretation and representation are”: Bates 2003).

Nevertheless the problem of reliability cannot be eluded by these research practices, if for no other reason than because the recount is used for its capacity to reconstruct processes: which in some way obliges us to count on the (empirical) reliability of the reports used.

These considerations also bring up the question of the specificity of the sociological use of stories and recounts as compared with other forms of narration for which the problem of empirical verification according to the rules of sociological methods does not arise. With the biographical methods, sociological research is extremely close to artistic forms of expression. And at least for some functions/values attributed to the narration form, the benefits of its sociological use are not so clear: for instance, as regards the communication efficacy of this form, its capacity to give “exemplary” evidence “to events which make the marginalisation processes”, it is difficult – once admitted that the difference between “true” and “likely” is not relevant from this point of view (especially if a constructivist approach is appropriately adopted) – to perceive the advantages of the stories told by sociologists (compare for example these stories with the stories of the homeless told by Jean-Claude Izzo in *Le soleil des mourants*).

As a more general question: what are the elements, if they exist, which confer a specificity and a value to these stories collected by social scientists and to those recounted by social scientists, once it is ascertained that the “truth” of the stories told is not the point in question? It is easy to imagine that on this basis, the disciplinary status itself of social sciences is at issue.

Art in the West has been defined in opposition to science [but] ethnography, like every documentary, is in fact a form of art disguised as science. It is thus our task to reveal the art hidden inside what appears in the form of non-art. In this way we pay tribute to our “informers”, who are not true and genuine narrators and whose stories have been badly told, as if they were science (Taussig 1999).

Finally the claim of a general/universal value in the biographical method of studying the homeless risks coming into conflict with the paradoxical consequences of the correlations between methods and the theoretical schemes. There is a critical aspect of the experience of homelessness which also has a methodological consequence: the difficulty of telling one’s story, which for the homeless may take on extreme characteristics. In many cases the ‘no abode’ is a person who no longer possesses autobiographical skills:

The “right” to tell your story. There is a talent in each one of us which we might call an “autobiographical skill” [...], a capacity to tell our own story which allows us to answer the question “Who am I?”, each time that it is raised by ourselves or by others. This biographical skill is embedded so deeply in each of us that we can only identify it, highlight its existence and how it manifests *when it is absent* [...]. One of the advantages of life histories is paradoxically to understand what happens when our story does *not* emerge, what happens when the interviewer finds it difficult to follow the interviewee in his/or her windy elaborations, rather than a straight forward narrative thread [...]. The incapacity to tell ones story is often found in cases of serious marginalisation [...]. The incapacity to narrate ones story must make us reflect on the circumstances required to exercise this skill: a home, a family, a network of significant relationships, a job [...] are some of the conditions necessary for exercising this ability (Corradi 1994, 113).

## **Micro/macro**

Different narratives are opposed in the analysis of the factors/causes of homelessness. Generally speaking it can be considered that “the overall complex of factors involved in the production of social exclusion requires analysis at a macro-structural and a micro-

biographical level” - a distinction that is also current in studies on the homeless. “The prevailing model in the research on homeless today is founded on the idea that structural factors define the risk, but personal biographical case histories must be looked at in order to understand who will actually become homeless”.

“While structural factors are determinants of family homelessness, there is also substantial evidence that individual characteristics operate as selection factors in deciding which poor families end up homeless” (Gulati 1994, 2). “The puzzling question arises as to why some people become homeless when other who appear equally vulnerable from a structural standpoint do not. To answer that question, we consider the biographic factors associated with homelessness” (Snow and Anderson 1993, 253). “[There are] two different narratives. The first narrative is a macro one and focuses on all the risk of impoverishment indicators [...] This narrative does not focus on the 'poor' but rather on 'poverty', that is, a broad social area where the potential for malign circuits to become activated is high. It is only through the second narrative, focusing on the life histories and social processes involving the behaviour and chain of events affecting the individuals and households for which the malign circuits are effectively activated, that we can develop our understanding of the poor and establish an effective connection between, on one side, factors and conditions and, on the other, behaviour” (Mingione 1996, 11-12).

This point of view involves various problems, that become particularly serious when analyses with these methods are in a context in which micro analyses predominate heavily and where there is an almost total lack of studies that address the structural aspects of homelessness, as occurs in Italy.

The situations that appear in case histories as constraints are determined by links between factors that cannot be checked at the level of individual case histories. The attempts themselves to manage the (shared) idea of causality at micro level recognizing that it does not have a linear character, etc. (histories that are neither predetermined nor linear, multiple causation, sequences and dynamics that cannot be determine *a priori*), suffer from the limits of an identification that exhausts itself at this level of analysis.

“The events studied in individual case histories are not connected to each other according to any single causal tie or typical sequence”. “Given these assumptions, the concept of INUS causes was introduced, taking the INUS conditions model meaning: the “insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient” (Mackie 1974). These are designed to show the dynamics of processes that lead to poverty when applied to individual case histories. Thus the loss of a job does not necessarily translate into the loss of housing unless other conditions occur at the same time such as the lack of a network of support and other events. “It is not therefore legitimate to seek the causes of poverty, but it is legitimate to seek the INUS causes of individual downdrift processes. But if then an individual INUS-cause recurs in more than one minimum sufficient conditions, in more than one of the possible sequences that lead individual destinies to a certain type of poverty, then it will happen frequently when crisis conditions exist and will be a reliable indicator of the presence of a state of crisis. While there is no 'integral cause' for complex phenomena like poverty, it is nevertheless possible to draw up - for each type of poverty - a list of INUS-causes in rank order which are 'more probable than others', and therefore a category of 'predictors more reliable than others’” (Micheli and Laffi 1993).

On the other hand there is the well-known theoretical heterogeneity between the two levels that makes it difficult - or impossible - to connect them.

“The two narratives cannot be connected either logically (the first operates with potential and quantitative correlations while the second deals with effective phenomena and qualitative processes) or technically (the quantitative data produced by the first cannot be corroborated with precision in the second, as what matters here is the typology of processes rather than numbers that cannot be representative). This has the effect of leaving the debate open” (Mingione 1996, 12). “We lack a coherent set of methods for bridging the gap between the micro/individual and the macro/structural. The levels-of-analysis problem is particularly acute in research on homelessness. Most researchers understand at least implicitly that the homelessness of any given subset of people is the product of factors on different levels, from the individual psychological to the global economic. But we have nothing, on a purely meta-theoretical level, equivalent to the computers models in population biology that capture both the structures of risk and incentive and the contours of individual vulnerability, revealing in simulation the non obvious consequences of the interactions between the individual and the ecological” (Blasi 1994, 581).

## **Marginalisation as a process**

As concerns the substance of the theoretical frameworks, the main rhetoric draws from the basic elements of the prevalent schemes of poverty analysis: that poverty is a multi-dimensional, cumulative process, and hence a process which tends to move downwards (an inexorable slide into the abyss is a rhetoric shared by sociologists, writers and also by many of the no abode in their life stories).

According to most researchers, the sequence in the course of a biography enables us to liken the career of the homeless as similar to a “career of poverty”. The latter is defined as a regressive life course in which the original causes of deprivation are followed by behaviour which strengthens those causes (Torri, Tosi 2004).

This idea is applied to both the process which leads to the streets and to the “homeless career”, the process which starts from the moment of arrival on the streets.

As concerns the paths that lead the no abode to become such, the predominant opinion considers “ending up on the streets” as the final outcome of a progressive path of deteriorating conditions of individual life, punctuated by points of significant breaks with the past along the different dimensions of the career (family, work, health, etc.). There are differences in the way these breaks are conceptualised. Some speak of “micro-breaks”, others of “precipitating” or “disrupting events”. There is basically, however, substantial agreement, in line with studies on exclusion processes in general, in considering that those events (breaks with the family, experiences of alcoholism or drug addiction, loss of a job etc.) tend to combine accumulatively giving rise to descending trajectories which lead to the life on the streets (Torri, Tosi 2004).

As concerns the homeless career, this tends, in the research examined in our short paper, to coincide with the passages marked by a deteriorating path and progressive loss of re-insertion capacities which starts from the moment of arrival. “The initial causes of deprivation are followed by behaviour which reinforces those causes and new hardship accumulates to produce a situation of unsustainable social exclusion”. “After a certain length of time spent on the streets, the homeless can no longer count on their previous personal resources and capacities to return to society” (Meo 2000, 170-171).

There may be reasons for the idea of a progressive worsening, at least when applied to homeless careers. Permanence on the streets (the passage of time) may be interpreted as the history of “successive losses of resources and capacities” which gradually increase vulnerability and “a career may be interpreted as a process of becoming chronic which feeds on itself and in the course of which the states of hardship in the different dimensions of existence interact and progressively consolidate, lowering the capacity to react and reducing the possibilities of recovery” (idem).

Meo identifies a sort of “threshold effect” in the course of homeless careers. The duration of the phases varies as a function of individual characteristics, but the total length of time spent on the street is of specific consequence and importance. Resources and capacities to leave street life diminish or disappear as do the individual differences connected with their past histories. Beyond a certain threshold of time the condition of life takes on a structure that tends to make individual behaviour patterns and orientation identical. Similarly, “beyond a certain level of seriousness, the conditions of life of the poor seem to be basically the same and they present problems of degradation and rootlessness that are practically identical” (Bagnasco, Negri 1994, 85).

Yet, getting out from the street is possible, homelessness may be temporary, even long or chronicised homeless careers do not justify that idea of “irrecoverability” which so often (even if not explicitly) goes with the idea of poverty as a regressive process.

(Of course, this has nothing to do with recognizing that long term/chronicised careers make situations which are among the most dramatic and the most difficult to deal with. In fact, the most exacting intervention strategies addressed to serious marginalization (for instance multi-dimensional and individually contracted reintegration plans) have been developed with these people in mind).

More clearly groundless is the idea of a progressive path to marginalisation when it is applied to the whole process of marginalisation. “The notion of accumulation does not imply “a linear process that would lead individuals from a situation of vulnerability to one of social disaffiliation”, “the appearing of the first difficulties does not mean for all the individuals that they will enter a cumulative process necessarily leading to more and more serious problems” (Paugam 1993, 164, 168). On this aspect it is clearer that the process approach is often worked out in such a way to support the idea that the marginalisation process itself “contains” an intrinsically downward tendency.

As has been observed, the strong insistence, in the ideology of research into poverty, on the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon and on the cumulative character of the processes at work risks hiding essential elements of the question. It may on the one hand introduce principles of generalisation/standardisation which conflict with the principle of a plurality of paths to and figures in poverty. On the other hand, and as a consequence, there is the risk of imagining that natural regressive tendency as characterising the processes of impoverishment in general.

As is well known, there are relative deprivations, sectorial poverties and poverties that do not involve problems of marginalisation. Different combinations of poverty and exclusion are possible and different forms of “integrated poverty” are present in various national and regional realities.

This is also true for homelessness, for which heterogeneity is a commonly recognised factor. There are cases for which being homeless is a frequent occurrence - even in the literal sense - without this involving marginalisation, e.g. many foreign immigrants as regards the Italian case.

Figures suffering from long-lasting/chronic homelessness and cumulative processes are just one of the possibilities and this type of distinction is commonly used in studies on homelessness. The distinction/opposition between the temporary or occasional homeless and the permanent homeless is a common one among researchers. Many insist on the fact that most of the homeless are not long term homeless (Avramov 1995, 79)

### **A social construction**

With the problem defined as such, the relationship with the question of the social construction of homelessness is clear. The insistence on extreme situations and the homogenisation of the problem "downwards" reflects the strength of the prevailing constructions, which are centred on the "hard" cases.

The point is particularly clear in the Italian construction. As reported in previous papers, the construction of the problem of the homeless in Italy has been centred on the figure of the ‘no abode’ (*senza dimora*), i.e. the socially marginalised homeless. In general the entire debate on poverty leads to a primary focus on situations of particular gravity and advanced stages in the processes of marginalisation.

The nearly identification between homelessness and social exclusion/extreme poverty is one of the aspects shared most by Italian researchers, on the basis of the common reference to the representation of the homeless as no abode. Many representations of “phases” draw on traits conventionally attributed to the no abode.

According to dominant conceptualization, the paths of the homeless represent an illustration of typical processes of extreme poverty as represented by current approach to poverty: the multi-dimensional character, the vicious circle in which different types of hardship follow one after the other and accumulate: the isolation from social networks of relations and support, the loss of independence in the satisfaction of primary needs, the mental and physical deterioration, the collapse of self-esteem and motivation and finally the progressive loss to the capacity to react.

Reference to the no abode prevents adequate inclusion in the research of those figures and processes that do not present the conventional traits of this figure: the temporarily homeless, the non chronic forms of homelessness, the homeless not characterised by the traits of a destructured and passive personality, those, that is who still maintain abilities and initiative, etc. The policy implications are obvious (for instance the scarce recognition of sectoral needs, of situations which require ‘weak’ intervention, at the expense of strong/multidimensional intervention or intervention with a strong dosage of social work support) (Tosi 1999).

The new “dynamic approaches” have shown the reasons for the limitations of the prevailing approach to poverty. Their criticisms attack the idea of poverty as a regressive process, together with its standardising implications.

“Poverty is not inevitably a stable condition; on the contrary, it is more frequently a brief experience in life which only involves families for limited periods of time”. “Most people who start on a path into poverty remain in this condition for only a few years, only very few persons will become chronically poor”.

These criticisms, which concern some of the key points of the dominant schemes of poverty, have been also advanced with regard to current research into the processes of marginalisation/exclusion, showing the theoretical correlates of the question.

The target is the idea of a "rule" according to which poverty lasts a long time and takes root in the course of time. The theoretical reasons for this "belief" are: the assumption that poverty careers are reinforced cumulatively and that they can therefore only be pushed "downwards"; and that the poor are hardly ever conceived of as capable of acting autonomously, as active people who can be protagonists in the construction of their own life course.

Although the research on marginalisation involves a “dynamic” dimension as far as it focuses on poverty careers, "normally these relate to processes of falling into poverty and of reinforcing the condition of poverty. These concepts therefore also relate to the relatively long-lasting conditions of poverty and fixed groups of poor people.

From a theoretical and methodological viewpoint the issue questions the status of the ideas of phases and cumulative processes. The notion of phases makes it possible to “order” the elements of a process. Thinking in terms of “phases” performs two opposing functions: on the one hand it distinguishes and on the other it generalises and standardises. To order the elements of a process in this sense may be important from a practical point of view, because it focuses attention on the role that the availability or shortage of certain policies/services plays in determining the passage from one phase to another, and therefore on the nature of the different policies required. On the other hand it risks relying on a specific model, despite declarations to the contrary which almost every researcher feels obliged to make. In many applications the idea of phases supports precisely that notion that marginalisation/exclusion processes intrinsically “contain” a downward tendency. Taken by themselves, the elements of which a phase is composed are just a set of circumstances, which do not necessarily mean that

a person passes from one to the other. The majority of persons involved do not pass from one phase to the “next”; and from each phase you can pass to any of the others, even “backwards”. However, the “ordering” of the elements of a process is made starting from the last phase, from the extreme outcomes of the process. It is a path reconstructed “backwards”: the “outcome” would reflect on the previous history.

“The cumulateness is quite simply a description of the process, seen in its most extreme final states and the multiplicity of handicaps is the experience that characterises situations of unmistakable marginalisation or “social disqualification”” (Paugam 1993, 164, 168).

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