

Qualitative methods and the homeless: the biographical approach in Italian research

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Biographical methods and research on the homeless

The relationships between research issues and the methodology adopted underpin the structure of our research programme and identifies the different workshops. The present workshop bears the following characteristics:

- in terms of methodology, it focuses on narrative interviews, life histories and diary methods, and the general objective of “recording the lives and voices of the homeless”;
- in terms of issues, it aims to understand the life histories of the homeless population, and the meaning of homelessness, with policy consequences regarding the risk factors and the factors that can contribute to exiting homelessness.

The field for this workshop puts together different things, which raise different questions. Nevertheless all the different questions lead to a reflection on the heart of the qualitative methods as rediscovered in social sciences in recent decades. Furthermore, they constitute the core of qualitative research for the study of homelessness. It is in this perspective that the programme charged the workshop with the task of addressing the issue of integration between qualitative and quantitative methods.

As it was shown by research studies that adopted this technique, there is a relationship between methods of the narrative interview and life history types (which we will refer to as “biographical methods”) and some (theoretical) schemes for the interpretation of the homeless. This applies in particular to European research. 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, etc.

Resort to interviews and life stories combines here 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.

“Studies and research on poverty have demonstrated that in most cases, the condition of socio-economic hardship is the outcome of a process during which a chain of event occurs. These events progressively require the use of greater and greater resources until the capacity of the individual or the family to satisfy their own needs is exhausted. Basically, in general, the condition of poverty cannot be put down to one specific circumstance but to a progressive worsening of life as a whole. In the case of persons of no abode, however, a “precipitating” event can often be traced which marks the breaking point in their life histories. Usually it is the circumstance in which the home was lost. In most cases, however, there are events which weigh on situations - individual or family - that have already been weakened, in which resources or capacities are already scarce both because of intrinsic fragility - atypical families, scarce cultural resources, scarce financial resources - and

because of a previous succession of destabilising events - illnesses, bereavements, psychological problems and unemployment. There are often “events-catastrophes” at the origin of a no abode condition which unload onto a multiplicity of factors to produce vicious circles that it is very difficult to exit from. The spheres in which these events most frequently occur are those of work and family relationships” (Commissione 2002, 157–158).

These studies - including those presented in this paper - put forward certain issues that characterise the research and debate on the homeless with particular force:

- the process and multidimensional character of poverty (that justifies recourse to analysing life histories and concepts such as “career”, “trajectory” etc.);
- the socially constructed character of the events that constitute hardship and social exclusion (recognising the interactive character of poverty and exclusion means “guarding against a fetishist conception of hardship and deprivation. The importance of networks shows that the difficulties caused by incapacities or deprivations are in actual fact social constructions. Appropriate interaction contexts are capable of softening both materially and psychologically the effects of events such as becoming unemployed or suffering from a disability. On the other hand inadequate interaction contexts can be a cause of poverty in themselves”) (Iard 1995, 10);
- and therefore the critical significance that analyses conducted with these methodologies can have both from an analytical and a policy viewpoint. To a large extent this critical objective depends on the possibility of dismantling the operational and analytical categories in use in the research and the intervention (an issue fully dealt with this decade as far as the distance between the service system and the specificity of the needs of the homeless is concerned) (Gui 1995).

This paper considers three Italian research studies that use biographical methods and seeks to understand how these methods are understood and applied, how the objectives they are given are pursued and what they actually “yield”.

The investigations considered outline common approaches used in the research on the “no abode” in Italy. Each of the research studies considered is described here in relation to the research objectives and the underlying theoretical framework, with particular attention to the methodological choices made. The comment that follows the description of the studies, however, examines some of the problematic connections between the construction of the problem, the method used and the results achieved with reference to general aspects and problems of biography based research.

Research studies in Italy: the issues, methods and theoretical frames

The issue and the approach

In some Italian research studies, the “landing on the streets” is assumed as an ideal-typical example of a disrupting event and of a biographical break. This justifies the use of the “disrupting-coping scheme” to observe the reaction to events which represent crucial turning points in the course of a life. They are events that disrupt established behaviour patterns, how a person has perceived him/herself and defined their situation until that moment. Faced with these breaks the capacity to keep one’s cognitive bearing, to restructure one’s patterns of behaviour and to define new daily routines or in other words the capacity to cope becomes fundamental.

This is made clear in the case of a survey carried out in Turin on three extreme cases of “disrupting events” and of “biographical breaks with the past” (Meo 2000). One of the three describes the situation of “people who find themselves living on the streets”. The other two cases concern the birth of a child with a serious disability and the lapse into drug addiction. As opposed to the other two, the survey of the “social world of the homeless” presents an ethnographical accentuation. While the other two studies are based solely on autobiographical accounts in which the interviewees reconstruct their stories retrospectively, in the case of the homeless the acquisition of biographies is accompanied by other instruments used to explore how people adapt to life on the streets: the ways in which they provide for their physical survival, the relations between individuals and the social environment of their lives, their representations of self and others and orientations towards the future. The definition of “homeless” used here is typically multidimensional, or a “cluster” definition. The condition of those who find themselves living on the street lies at the cross roads between problems of different types, that have intertwined and reciprocally aggravated one another. “The hardship of the homeless is due to the convergence of several unfulfilled needs” (Meo 2000, 172). In the majority of cases they are persons alone and isolated from networks of family solidarity. Their past histories are often marked by critical events or situations of social exclusion, such as the loss of a job, a marriage crisis, a prison sentence, drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. The condition of homelessness is treated as the extreme outcome of a chain of events and situations which have gradually compromised the possibility of maintaining a home. Other forms of housing hardship which, although they consist of the transitory lack of accommodation, have specific origins and developments (according to the researcher), are explicitly excluded from the analysis. Individuals or families evicted from housing unable to gain access to housing with their own means do not fall within the definition of “homeless”. Nomads for whom the lack of housing is considered a distinguishing cultural trait are not considered, nor are non EU citizen immigrants for whom the lack of housing falls within a logic of social mobility and can represent a transitory phase of a migration plan.

In a similar way, in the field study carried out by Bonadonna (Bonadonna 2001) the definition that enables the researcher to limit the area of the research is based on the sum and the overlap of different types of problem.

“The lexicon temporarily adopted here defines as “of no fixed abode” those persons who find themselves simultaneously in a grave state of need and extreme material insecurity (permanent lack of accommodation, minimum income, health, possibility of access to health and social services, break with family, social and friendship networks) and a progressive condition of risk of further physical and/or mental deterioration” (Bonadonna 2001, 19).

Nevertheless, the reference to the absence of accommodation remains the central element of this definition.

“What the no abode share most is the lack of a private place they can manage independently. And it is precisely to the extent that the absence of an abode constitutes an extremely serious lack from a social and psychological viewpoint, essential from a cultural viewpoint, that I feel that the most appropriate, accurate and relevant definition is that which places the emphasis on material, primary and fundamental needs: a fixed abode, where fixed is not intended as forever, but for the time required to make life plans” (Bonadonna 2001, 21).

Although he came into contact with a fair number of non Italian persons of no abode and was aware that foreigners living on the streets in Italy outnumber Italians, the researcher limited his field of study to the latter for practical purposes. He felt that a study of the adaptation to the metropolis of those who have lost guarantees and social networks should not overlap with the dual adaptation of immigrants connected with the trauma of

being far from their culture of origin. Including foreigners in the study too would have meant analysing other levels of adaptation and cultural mutation, economic and linguistic above all.

This is a field study conducted over a twelve month period in the Rome metropolitan area. It is designed to investigate the ways of adaptation and the urban itineraries of the no abode in their everyday lives. The researcher entered into contact during this period with persons of no abode who frequented particular districts of the Rome metropolitan area. He was able to establish special relationships with some of them and to follow them in their daily movements.

“I passed almost a year with persons of no fixed abode. I lived with them day and night in the rain, the freezing cold and under the burning sun” (Bonadonna 2001, 13).

The study deliberately restricts its field of study to concentrate primarily on those who refuse night time and often day time assistance from the various social services available in the area and was oriented towards person who had made the city of Rome a stable point of reference and not just during the period of the research. The choice was concentrated on neighbourhoods in which the presence of the no abode is particularly high (the Trastevere district, the ancient city centre in general and the Tiburtina district), to then follow the everyday movements of some of the persons to other parts of the city.

Other research studies focus on the concept of poverty and the need to redefine it within a less unitary and a broader framework. According to some authors, extreme poverty represents the limit point of a mass vulnerability. In this scenario, the “new street careers” no longer lie on the periphery of society but at its centre. Research are designed to show the new interconnections between the welfare circuit and the survival circuit which characterise the biographies of those who live mainly on the streets.

The survey conducted by Bergamaschi, for example, “seeks to identify indicators which could confirm a change already hypothesised by other studies: the non transitory and non fortuitous presence in urban post-industrial space of segments of the population that apart from their biographies, histories and individual careers, experience a common condition of deprivation” (Bergamaschi 1999, 72).

The research is organised into two sections. The first concerns “life histories within an institution: the night shelter”. This part of the research seeks to define an image of users of the Bologna night shelter. It starts by acknowledging the difficulty and at times the impossibility for many of gaining access to the social services present in the community.

“The absence among service users of specific recognised official and established representation, seemed to constitute the greatest obstacle to the positive interaction of these users with social services” (Bergamaschi 1999, 88).

The second section concerns “street careers”. In many cases the relationship with any type of service is either on an occasional basis or it is non existent. This part of the research started from the need for an approach able to examine the living conditions in which this relationship is absent by observing the poverty starting from the place in which it is lived. Those persons not using services were selected on the basis of their permanent presence on the streets.

Both of these research studies have in common a critical attitude to the construction of ‘categories’ and to the forced, to a greater or lesser degree, insertion of concrete conditions of life within them. These categories are the result of a dependence of research on the operational demands of policies and of services action.

“Sociological research on poverty still tends to assume formulation and conceptualisation produced by intervention policies as its interpretative framework. One may speak more exactly of the joint constitution of a field of discourse in which intervention policies and sociological research have created their own areas of study and/or intervention within specific functional spheres” (Bergamaschi 1999, 86).

The “break” that occurred recently in this field of discourse – with the diffusion and emergence of living situations that are increasingly new – makes it more difficult to repropose a category type interpretative/intervention framework. The current forms of poverty bring out the inadequacy of sociological knowledge based on the equation set up between the individual and the target group.

Avoiding the category approach and the crystallisation of living situations in homogenous target groups nevertheless involves big methodological difficulties.

“It is not a question of starting from individuals to “construct” categories or, vice versa, constructing categories in which to then insert individuals. The research approach [adopted] assumes as its starting point: (a) the identification of concrete living situations in which an individual finds or may find her/himself for a period, long or short, of their life; (b) the construction of typical histories, starting from concrete living situations” (Bergamaschi 1999, 86-87).

The method

A widespread method of investigation consist of “giving voice to persons living in the conditions under study to explore, on the basis of their accounts, the subjective experiences of their disability, of life on the streets and of drug addiction” (Meo 2000, 17). The way of life is grasped in the dimension of daily life: the practices and routines with which the persons interviewed obtain essential goods and use and appropriate urban space are observed along with the network of relations, identity traits and the cognitive orientations that distinguish them.

“The analysis focuses on their living conditions and attempts to bring out their subjective experiences and what they are going through. It explores how these individuals survive physically, socially and psychologically ‘on the streets’, which is to examine what forms of adaptation they develop, how they survive materially, what relations they hold with the social environment they live in, how they give meaning to their lives, how they represent it to themselves and to others and what their outlook is toward the future” (Meo 2000, 114).

The instruments used are of the qualitative type and are based on a biographical approach. Nevertheless, given the specificity of the subject matter, the narrations of life histories is accompanied by other instruments such as participatory observation and in-depth interviews of privileged witnesses (social workers and volunteers operating in the welfare field).

The explicit reasons for using life histories as the main source of information are based on the idea of a strategic actor. This method does in fact lend itself to acquiring subjective definitions of the situation, the underlying interpretational models, the resources and constraints perceived as structuring the various circumstances encountered, and how the people adapt and redefine their perception of self.

“An attempt was made by connecting the behaviour patterns to symbolic processes to account for the intentions that the individuals attributed to their actions and to throw light on how they give sense to their experiences and how they construct their biographies “ (Meo 2000, 17).

The analysis turns both on the impact of events on the biographies and on the manner and processes of adaptation. In this context, the arrival on the street constitutes a dual point of observation. On the one hand it makes it possible to analyse the paths followed in the biographies: the stages the homeless went through and the transformations that they undergo according to the social and individual circumstances encountered. On the other hand how the

individuals shape the course of their life adapting and reacting to the circumstances they encounter is observed at the moment they land on the streets: how they define and assess situations, what plans intentions and models of orientation they employ to tackle them, what strategies they adopt to adapt, and what resources and capacities they marshal as a response.

Studies borrowing from the ethnographical tradition, usually integrate different methods of acquiring data. In the case of Bonadonna's research study ten life stories were acquired on video and audio media and using questionnaires to obtain biographical data (age, sex, distance from primary networks). Interviews were held in three sessions for each person. The first interview allowed space for the free flow of the thoughts of the interviewee, while the subsequent interviews dealt with everyday life experiences and biographical stories following a narrative path with structured questions (Bonadonna 2001).

The researcher does not hide the difficulties encountered in restricting the roles, the temptation to eliminate the distance between interviewer and interviewee, between the researcher and the individual investigated.

Although I sympathised, often painfully and always emotionally with what I was gradually learning from my progressively intense relations with the interviewees, I realised that my extraneousness to the situation should not - and could not - be eliminated (Bonadonna 2001, 40).

One of the ways of establishing that distance that allows an observer to perform his work consists of explaining the purpose of the meetings and the interviews to the interviewee. Declaring the purpose makes the status of the researcher explicit. And then the video camera had the heuristic virtue of making the researcher immediately recognisable. The use of a video camera constitutes an effective way of remaining at the place of observation and at the same time of disengaging. "The video camera creates a setting, a way of relating that allows the researcher to maintain his dual, complex role of participant who observes. [The video camera] also acts as a filter for the emotions, [...] as a way of distancing oneself, through the viewfinder, from the subject matter observed in order to avoid becoming excessively involved" (Bonadonna 2001, 39).

The use of biographical methods is justified in these cases by the demand for an in-depth understanding of "what it means to be of no fixed abode".

"It requires great imagination to understand what it means to be of no fixed abode. Think of finding yourself on the street without knowing where to go because you have nowhere to go: neither a home, nor a friend, nor a relative, nothing" (Bonadonna 2001, 13).

The method is also associated with a critical purpose: overcoming the practice of classifying persons of no abode which is typical of the policy definition systems as well as of some research perspectives. The reductions of reality that occur in the attempt to construct "classifications" of the no abode can be, according to Bonadonna, effective in formulating welfare strategies for community services but at the same time they are limited in understanding the everyday lives and the ways in which those who live on the street adapt to their condition.

By dividing the universe of the no abode into drug addicts, alcoholics, the mentally ill, and so on, the way of investigating the causes of the slide into life on the streets will logically fall into a causal and deterministic approach. The same reasons are in fact used as those employed to catalogue who is and is not of no fixed abode. It would supposedly be because of alcohol, drugs, or madness that these persons ended up on the streets.

One task of the research is also that of overcoming the conceptualisations of hardship that tend to lump together very different dimensions: from being of no fixed abode to being mentally ill. This approach too risks confusing the phenomenon with the category.

An approach designed to integrate two survey instruments was used in the study carried out by Bergamaschi (Bergamaschi 1999) to investigate the reality experienced by users of the night shelter, a short questionnaire with 40 questions and the acquisition of life histories.

The character of the users themselves required the integration of the questionnaire with life histories so that biographical materials could be collected for use as a further resource for the survey. The value attributed to the biographical approach was in this case its capacity to grasp “those nearby phenomena, perhaps small numerically, which may turn out to be loaded with meaning for our understanding of the present”. Some new forms of poverty constitute, for example, a privileged observatory for transformations of a different type, but potentially important and overlooked by sociology.

“Priority was given in the life histories to events which marked the life of the individuals and their effect on the biography over time” (Bergamaschi 1999, 91).

The questionnaire was given to all users of the night shelter who stayed for at least one night in the facility during the course of the two three-month periods of the research. The life histories were limited to a sample (not representative) of users.

“The lack of symbolic established representation, the excessive individuality and singularity of the different histories and the weak group identification constituted obstacles to the definition of a sample from which fully generalisable histories could be extracted” (Bergamaschi 1999, 90).

Because of this difficulty, declared by the researcher, in ordering the variety and heterogeneity of the biographical data, the analysis was limited to a few emblematic life histories while generalisations were left to the questionnaire data.

The questionnaire consisted of four groups of questions designed to verify the research hypothesis. The first group included questions on the objective particulars of the interviewees (sex, age, place of birth, time of residence in the municipality of Bologna, civil status, current and past employment). The second group of questions was on the social and health condition, designed to discover the types of illness contracted by the poor. The third area concerned the frequency and length of use of the night shelter. The last area turned on the use in general of public and private sector social services present in the community.

The structure of the questionnaire was designed to acquire all significant factors while at the same time avoiding invading the privacy of the individuals with the risk of meeting with a refusal to be interviewed. The number of questions was limited in order to avoid being excessive for individuals already tired from a day spent mainly on the streets.

The part of the research on “street careers” also employed a combination of different techniques to acquire data. The life histories here were integrated with direct observation of some of the public places frequented by the poor and with the use of biographical documentation from other surveys on the same subject. The persons interviewed are considered as “ethnographical spokespersons” and their narrations as “descriptions of particular itineraries within given social contexts”.

The biographical approach gives access to a definition of situations formulated by individuals who live on the street at different times in the trajectories of their lives. Prominence was given in interpreting the biographical materials to particularly significant moments in these life histories marked by extreme poverty: the subsequent and progressive breaks with the past, the

relationship with the urban community, the welfare circuit, the failure of local public welfare to take them in hand.

Although the two sections of the research had different objectives and developed partially independently, the considerations concerning the method that the researcher explicitly makes can be discussed together. Generally speaking the biographical method is seen as specifically useful with regard to phenomena that tends to be latent and not easily interpretable such as the new extreme poverty. The biographical approach is identified as a theoretical-practical instrument useful for studying concrete living situations of individuals suffering from extreme poverty and the concrete procedures for intervention followed by institutions.

The description of single and particular life trajectories must, however, be set in relation to the social dimension, according to the principle of the concrete similarity of different life situations and not comparable solely because they belong to the same administrative category. In this sense the task of biographically based research is to throw light on the inconsistencies between the concrete living situations of individuals and the processes by which the procedures to implement services crystallise. It achieves it by comparing the personal strategies of those actors classified as poor with the plurality of definitions of poverty that different institutions produce, which are often conflicting.

The theoretical frame

A great number of studies employs a “life course” approach. In this context individual biographies are seen as dynamic processes consisting of a multiplicity of interconnected and interdependent careers/trajectories that develop and evolve over time.

In the broad sense of the term used here, the careers relate to the different dimensions of which existence is composed (family, friends, work, education, biological, etc.). They are punctuated by events and move through various stages. They are sequences of life situations, states and transitions which develop within specific spheres of social interaction.

The notion of career that is used is based on Goffman’s theory, and relates to a “sort of common thread of a social character followed by a person in the course of his life” (reverse translation of Goffman 1961, Italian translation 153). The term here is used in a broader sense as compared to the concept of career employed by studies of professions. A career is not necessarily a linear and planned progression of stages in the direction of more desirable social positions but may take different forms and even follow a downward course. The concept of a career has both an objective and a subjective side to it. While the former regards the institutional forms through which individuals participate in the social world (positions, appointments, changes of status), the second concerns the meanings that individuals attribute to the course of their life and their definitions of situations.

The concept of an “event” in relation to that of a career translates into the idea of a change of state within a career. The notion of a “disrupting event” is used to indicate the destabilising effect that an event such as finding oneself on the street can produce in the life of an individual.

The consequences of a disrupting event (Meo 2000) are attributable not only to the intrinsic characteristics of the event but also to the impact on the individual biography of the person. A number of factors are important such as the previous history, the material and symbolic resources possessed, the interaction contexts and, not insignificant, the sequence and chronological order in which the event in question occurs with respect to other events and trajectories. The occurrence of this 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, and in which new hardships accumulate to produce a situation of unsustainable social exclusion.

The histories of the homeless may be easily related to various elements which are typical to current conceptualisation of poverty: the multi-problem nature of their condition, the process development and the vicious circle in which different types of hardship follow one after the other and accumulate, the isolation from relationship and support networks, the loss of autonomy in the satisfaction of primary needs and the progressive mental and physical deterioration combined with the collapse of motivation and the progressive loss of the capacity to react.

For example, 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).

“Ending up on the streets is an event characterised by being the last of a series of other critical or cut-off events that have followed one after to other accumulating over time. The loss of financial resources, the lack of an adequate level of education, a marriage crisis and the consequent break-up of the family, or a disability or drug addiction can contribute to making an individual more vulnerable and expose him/her to the risk of social exclusion. When you arrive on the street the effects of ascribed variables have already disappeared and primary support relationships, if they ever existed have already been lost. The event is therefore also the outcome of the weakening of the social networks to which the individual belongs” (Meo 2000, 5).

Others research approach makes use of issues and interpretations that are central to theoretical reflection on the problem of the no abode, without adopting any single scheme. In case of Bonadonna’s study, the researcher considers this condition in the theoretical frame of extreme urban poverty. As opposed to traditional poverties linked to the lack of economic growth in a country, the new poverties are connected with the fact that the current socio-economic and institutional set up is no longer able to redistribute the wealth produced. The matter investigated is not traditional poverty but a specific category of a universe that very often also includes material poverty, but which cannot be limited to it (Bonadonna 2001).

“Impoverishment is a path, not a static condition and, it is important to make this clear, the problems are not exclusively material. Cases of vagabonds with a home are the proof of it as is the fact that many persons of no fixed abode come from the middle and upper-middle classes” (Bonadonna 2001, 92-93).

A divergence emerges between Bonadonna and paradigms of analysis which consider the trajectories of the no abode as sequences and combinations of “life stressful events” which would progressively lead people away from normal life. According to Bonadonna, this approach tends to simplify the interpretational picture as if by identifying the cause or causes of the drift onto the street it were possible to intervene scientifically to modify the effect.

“The causal mechanism which seemed to put the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle into place does not always help. In fact it is often a red herring and, if we dig, we find more” (Bonadonna 2001, 93).

“The needs of persons of no fixed abode cannot always be interpreted linearly and unequivocally. For example, the persons met for the purposes of the research refuse night time and often also day time assistance from the various welfare services. This refusal is motivated by a very wide variety of reasons: ideological, psychological, political, hygienic. By taking this first active action they make a choice, even when refusing assistance may mean putting their own survival at risk.”

“This irrationality is only apparent, because living less, on the street, where the priorities are of another type, is not at all an absolute concept” (Bonadonna 2001, 92).

The research points to different types of rationality which is hidden behind the practices, at times difficult to understand, of those who live with no fixed abode. The fundamental hypothesis is that street life is also a form of adaptation to the urban environment, a “subculture of the resistance capable of formulating a different perception of space-time reality”.

Active and rational strategies for managing relations with space and with time according to the resources to be obtained emerge from observation of forms of adaptation to street life. There are different ways of living on the streets. One may be either stationary or itinerant depending on the degree of mobility which often depends on the physical state of health of the no abode. Management of time is generally characterised by rather strict programming of daily activities ruled above all by the rigidity of the opening hours of welfare services.

“Persons of no abode formulate active, careful and rational strategies for adapting to life on the streets of a city [...]. Life on the streets is not only a form of passive and parasitic marginality” (Bonadonna 2001, 54).

In the study carried out by Bergamaschi, the issue of street life is treated in this study as a way of tackling the problem of new extreme poverty and the new risks of impoverishment and of social ties becoming fragile (Bergamaschi 1999).

One of the strong interpretations to support this line of research does in fact concern the reformulation of poverty within a broader and more complex theoretical framework which considers manifestations of extreme poverty together with risks of impoverishment and processes that make increasingly larger proportions of the population socially vulnerable. The explicit reference is to the notion of *désaffiliation* introduced by Robert Castel to indicate the outcome of the growth of social vulnerability that occurs when trends converge: an employment crisis on the one hand and the different processes which weaken social networks on the other.

The capability approach of Amartya Sen on the other hand is called on to integrate the analytical dimensions present in the notion of *désaffiliation* with a perspective centred more on the individual and on individual capabilities for using resources and translating them into well-being.

“The intention is to reconstruct by means of biographically based research distinguished by the acquisition and use of life histories, the stages in a process of *désaffiliation* and loss of the capabilities to transform available resources into *functionings*” (Bergamaschi 1999, 87).

Recourse to the notion of “career” is justified by the desire to emphasise the process, as opposed to the static, aspects of extreme poverty which concern those who “live prevalently on the streets”. This concept is employed to bring out the evolving aspects of a sequence of stages that mark out individual biographies. “What seems incomprehensible at one stage of the history, acquires meaning and its own necessity within a career” (Bergamaschi 1999, 123).

The notion of career, as a common thread of a social nature that is followed in the life cycle of a person is therefore useful in helping to overcome a static vision of poverty. It also relates to an analytical logic within biographical paths, to objective and subjective factors which combine in an individual’s definition of his/her situation.

The importance of “events” that form part of the web, the chain, of events reconstructed by individuals through their narrations can be deciphered within this framework of analysis.

“There is always a catastrophic event present in the biographical materials collected. The inability to deal with that critical event makes it impossible to reproduce behaviour that until that moment was taken for granted. In the words of the individual, that critical event marks a turning point: nothing is the same as it was before it” (Bergamaschi 1999, 125).

Nevertheless this reconstruction of the break with the past, performed by the individual, opens up a series of problems. How is it that different people react in different ways to the same event? The differing capacity to react to an event obliges the research worker to examine the biographical materials more carefully, without underestimating the rationalisation performed retrospectively by the interviewees and at the same time considering the biographical and social context on which the biographical break takes effect, the capacities present at that time. “There is always a desire to give a meaning, an order to past experiences in terms of their present life experience” (Bergamaschi 1999, 126).

“With a more careful reading of the biographical and social context, the event at the centre of an individual’s narration loses its character as a unique and exceptional event and comes to form part of an existence already marked by various breaks in the biography. A chain of breaks is visible in the trajectory of life at the time when the event that is subjectively perceived as catastrophic occurs and which is always located in a sequence of micro-breaks” (Bergamaschi 1999, 125-126).

Presentation of the results

In the study carried out by Meo, the presentation of the results follows the hypothesis by which the career of the homeless can be described as a sequence of three different phases: arrival on the street, adaptation to street life and the chronic condition. The biographical materials, which, incorporated in the researcher’s reconstruction, constitute the three main sections of the presentation of the results, are organised on the basis of this sequence of events (Meo 2000). The text alternates the reconstruction of the interviewees and the researcher’s comment. This approach tends to bring out the importance of typical and recurring aspects of the experience of street life in the three phases of the career path.

The researcher is specifically interested in observing the changes in the procedures followed to satisfy primary needs, in the type of relationships and the conception of self, that are common to all and which follow a regular sequence in their occurrence.

“Once they arrived on the street, the persons in question found themselves faced with similar circumstances, to which they reacted in recurring ways” (Meo 2000, 155).

“We are not looking here into the life experiences which led these people onto the street, rather we are examining how the loss of a home constitutes one of the last stages in a course of social marginalisation and loss of belonging to a context of relationships” (Meo 2000, 166).

Rather than chains of events, explanations and the attributions of meanings with which the interviewees reconstruct their life history from birth, the biographical materials are used to trace the recurrences and typical sequences in the singularity of the life histories. It is a “generalising” use of the biographies that therefore prevails. The life histories are used, in this case, to put order in the diversity and “informality” of the life histories.

Differently, Bonadonna defines the final account of the research as “a book in the book”, where interpretative chapters which discuss the different aspects of life on the streets and the factors which determine them alternate with chapters on the life histories (Bonadonna 2001).

“Everyone is free to read that book as they wish; the histories can be read here leaving the rest aside” (Bonadonna 2001, 14).

The separation of interpretative chapters from “history” chapters ensures that the latter maintain their own autonomy and integrity without being forced into the interpretative schemes and reconstructions of the researcher. The reader is given the possibility of tracing the connections between the life histories and the research chapters.

The language of the protagonists is respected to the utmost: “the Romanesque dialect with its metaphors and infinite variations”. Pseudonyms and nicknames are used, apart from for the key witness of the study, a person of no fixed abode who expressly asked to be cited by name.

In the study carried out by Bergamaschi, presentation of the results reflects the decision to integrate different methods of investigation as declared in the introduction by the researcher. Quantitative data and fragments of life histories are mixed and ordered according to the researcher’s reconstructions.

Fragments of the biographical materials are used to illustrate the typical histories, to trace and connect up common nodes in different trajectories.

“The use of life histories [...] induced us to link up the empirical results from the two survey techniques in the presentation of the results of the research. The combination of the two approaches enabled us to identify the patterns that emerged from individual experiences. The questionnaire employed in the research on extreme forms of poverty constitutes a real and important support when used in combination with a biographical approach. The “qualitative” technique is then used not as a mere illustration of the “quantitative” data, but as an independent contribution to an understanding of the phenomenon” (Bergamaschi 1999, 89).

A few comments

The reasons for biographical methods

The use of biographical methods is justified in the research analysed, not only on the grounds of general methodological convenience such as when basic knowledge is lacking (Tiso 1995) or when dealing with latent phenomena not easy to interpret and so on (Bergamaschi 1999), but also for reasons rooted in the research on homelessness and poverty, based that is on a specific conceptual framework and on a critical purpose attributed to the research.

The usefulness and the advantages of the method are seen directly in relation to a characterisation of homelessness and a set of interpretative requirements connected with theoretical approaches to (extreme) poverty: the main reason why many research studies rely on life histories is because of the multidimensional and process character of poverty/of homelessness.

Biographical methods have two strong points in understanding this character of homelessness: it is supposed to enable an appropriate and detailed reconstruction of the histories and the sequences of events that lead to life on the streets and of those paths which then constitute the story of homelessness; it is supposed to enable a better “understanding” of the experience of homelessness, an understanding “from the inside” because of the relationship the method is supposed to provide with the subjective meanings and experiences (“to give voice to people who have ended up on the streets to explore the subjective experiences of street life from their accounts”; “to bring out how they give meaning to the experiences of their life and how they construct their biography”: Meo 2000, 17).

The conditions required for the methods in question to achieve these ends are stringent: to deliver on the promises of the biographical approach depends on the possibility of/capacity to link up different elements within a biography, to connect up subjective and objective dimensions, structural events and data, etc. It is not an easy operation to deal with, as is also seen in the use of the concepts invented to meet this demand such as careers and so on.

These methodological attitudes are better understood if one considers the strong critical intentions common to this research, motivation that involves both the frameworks of analysis and the policies, and which concerns the principal methods of constructing categories with which the universe of the homeless is understood. The construction of the field of discourse in which intervention policies and sociological research have created the subject of homelessness has produced a classification system which contradicts the mobility and variety of “concrete situations of life” (Bergamaschi 1999). The system is visibly dependent on these operational demands; this type of classification fulfils obvious practical functions in the policy domain, but the reduction of needs to abstract categories of recipients can hardly satisfy a demand like that of the homeless which by definition is complex and heterogeneous.

“The biographical profiles and histories of persons of no fixed abode are very varied. It therefore follows that intervention to assist these persons must, or should, also be capable of recognising and dealing with this diversity: standard models of intervention in this field are not destined to succeed” (Commissione 2002, 161).

One example of this way of proceeding is given by the construction of categories that make reference to single dimensions by which the problems of the homeless tend to appear. “By dividing the universe of the no abode into drug addicts, alcoholics, mentally ill, and so on, the way of approaching the question of the causes of the slide into life on the streets will logically fall into a casual and deterministic approach since the same reasons are in fact used as those employed to classify who is and is not of no fixed abode” (Bonadonna 2001, 42).

This distance has increased and has become more and more visible with the manifestation of new situations of poverty: “the inadequacy of knowledge based on the individual-target group equation and its translation into types of intervention and services” has thus become manifest.

“The mobility of concrete situations of life must be understood as irreducible to preconceived or retrospectively defined categories: what remains is the specific individual biography, its breaks with the past and its strategies” (Bergamaschi 1999, 86).

One of the strong grounds on which the accreditation of the biographical approach in the field of research on the homeless is based is therefore the need to dismantle these categories in order to reformulate the criteria by which needs are identified. This line of research lies fully within a critical orientation of the role played by welfare services in the construction of the problem shared not only by a good number of the researchers in this field but also by workers involved in service provision. While the system of classification reduces needs to standard, uniform definitions, it also defines areas of right to access to services by discriminating between those that do or don't belong to groups identified as having a uniform content.

In this perspective, biographically oriented research can play a critical role because it can “restore the variety and irreducibility of life histories, highlighting the differences between the concrete situations of the lives of individuals and the processes by which the procedures to implement services crystallise, focusing on the personal strategies of actors classified as poor, etc.” (Bergamaschi 1999).

We can say that biographical methods show an overall consistency and potential effectiveness both in terms of the critical task given them and the demand for an analysis that takes account of the multi-dimensional and process character of homelessness. Particularly, the biographical approach is clearly consistent with the objective of providing a full and detailed account of the careers of the no abode with the focus on the concrete conditions of individual biographies and the way in which they intersect with the social environment, giving rise to different outcomes.

The problems concern the possibility/capability of moving with this method with regard to two questions (broadly connected one with the other): the ability to reconcile the preference (fully motivated) for the singularity of the biographies and the interest (necessarily pursued) in generalisations; the possibility of satisfactorily considering the relations between actor and structure (between structural determinants and histories, between macro and micro) and the possibility (with which models) of reconstructing chains of cause and effect at this (micro) level of analysis.

These problems are partly made visible by the fact that none of the research considered uses the biographical approach exclusively. They all tend to combine different sources and methods of acquiring data - according to two main criteria.

One method consists of integrating life histories with observation techniques which involve differing degrees of participation and involvement by the researcher. The acquisition of life histories becomes part of an overall strategy by the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the dimensions of the experiences and the daily practices of the no abode. Observation becomes an important component of the research because it enables to focus on the mechanisms employed to adapt to street life alongside the reconstructions of individual life histories. It focuses on the “concrete” living conditions of individuals, the relations with the spatial and social context and constructs the problem starting with what the persons do in addition to what they tell of themselves.

The second method is that of integrating the life history technique with an analysis of quantitative data acquired specially for the purpose, either by using questionnaires or from the secondary analysis of data acquired by other surveys and/or from services that care for and assist persons of no abode in the local community.

“The combination of the two approaches makes it possible to identify the patterns that emerge from individual experiences. Questionnaires constitute a real and important support for research into extreme forms of poverty when used in combination with a biographical approach. “Qualitative techniques are therefore used not as a mere illustration of the quantitative but as an independent contribution to an understanding of the phenomenon” (Bergamaschi 1999, 89).

Both combinations express a certain awareness of the limits of the biographical approach if used exclusively, although in directions which are in some ways opposite. The biographies provide answers to the questions posed by the research that are only partially adequate and above all present critical problems with regard to the extension and generalisation of the results.

Methodological uncertainty

The classic problems of the relationship of researcher with the subject of their research become particularly evident in research on the homeless, especially if methods are used which involve direct relationships, as in the case of biographical methods and even more so if this

involves “immersion in the situation” as in ethnographical type investigations. The relationship between keeping a distance and becoming involved with the subject of the research may involve quite exceptional tensions. One reason for this is because the emotional involvement inevitably becomes strong (Tiso 1995) and it is difficult to meet the technical principle to keep a distance and at the same time prevent sterilization of survey procedures, maintaining and making use of the “fondness” for the subject and the persons involved.

Then there are the well-known problems raised by the “construct” nature of the biographies narrated, the problems raised by the fact that the stories are subject to (re)constructions by the narrators - 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.

“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 classical methodological problem is that the validity of biographies can not be established empirically. 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. Besides, usually one is inclined to take the present situation as point of departure, and (re-)formulate the story of one's own life in such a manner that a sequence of events emerges with the present situation as its logical outcome. Usually, people have various versions of their personal biography at their disposal [...]. The life histories of (former) homeless persons are [conceived as] representations not so much of the objective truth, but rather of what passes for a plausible, authentic interpretation of it in their eyes. 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).

How do we take these recounts and what role does the researcher play, faced with these reconstructions? What value do these documents have? How do we manage them so that they do not contradict the reasons for which we originally decided to use the biographical method?

Their constructed character requires us to view the narrations as texts: this implies a hermeneutical approach and the respect for a plurality of viewpoints which reading makes possible.

“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).

Research practices are often far from meeting the requirements of this approach. Prevailing practices move between two extremes as far as concerns the role that researchers play with regard to the reconstructions of the narrator.

On the one hand the story, as it is narrated by the protagonist, is at times considered an original document itself and self evident, requiring no interpretive mediation.

(An interesting variant of this is adopted by Bonadonna: he leaves the role of interpretation to the reader, by separating the interpretive chapters from the “history chapters” so that the latter maintain their own autonomy and integrity without being forced into the interpretative schemes and reconstructions of the researcher).

On the other hand, in the majority of cases the researcher plays a strong “central” role in “putting order” into the histories. Elements of the biographies (pieces of the narrations) are selected (the “important elements”) and ordered on the basis of an interpretative scheme (usually: to illustrate different stages of a process of marginalisation). This procedure may go against the “links” with which the narrator gives/gave unity to his/her story, in contradiction to some extent with the reasons for resorting to the “viewpoint of the homeless”. More generally there is a risk with this type of attitude of “overlaying” one narrative scheme (scientific or administrative) on top of another with the consequence of giving up the advantages offered by a plurality of narratives and by interaction between different reconstructions.

Singularities and generalisations

These remarks raise a number of problems that lie at the roots of qualitative research on the process aspects and multi-dimensional structure of the phenomenon of homelessness.

By its very nature, the life history method lends itself to understanding the individual characteristics of life histories. The single and irreducible biographical trajectories are reconstructed from the internal viewpoint of the narrator on the basis of mechanisms for selecting and combining objective and subjective data, data from memory and the attribution of meaning to his/her actions.

The prerogatives of the life history method and of the biographical approach in general consist primarily of their capacity to penetrate and reconstruct the contexts of individual action (resources, networks, constraints) in detail and their capacity to gain access to points of view (definitions of situations) which identify the position of the individual in those contexts.

“The overall resources of the biographical approach are those of specification and detailed information and a general in-depth analysis of the levels of diagnosis” (Olagnero, Saraceno 1993, 20).

On the other hand the requirement to bring the life histories, with their uniqueness and particularity, within the sphere of general “schemes” of interpretation is a basic problem common to a large part of the research which makes use of the biographical approach. This requirement can enter into conflict with the specific characteristics of the biographical approach. Certainly the use of biographical materials may occur with different orientations: there is a propensity on the one hand to make an individualistic use of the histories and on the other to make more abstract and generalised use of them, but at least we find, with very few exceptions, the search for patterns and links, for recurring events and behaviour by which typical sequences and phases that characterise the paths and existential situations of those who have ended up on the street can be identified.

Adopting one or the other orientation does not change the substance of the problem.

“To speak of the life of an individual in the field of sociology means committing yourself to maintaining a dual level of observation and analysis, that relating to the concrete person in flesh and blood and that relating to the typical/representative individual. The typical individual defines a system of expectations concerning what can and cannot be presumed by a typical actor in a typical situation” (Schutz 1974, cit. in Olagnero, Saraceno 1993, 13).

The “typical individual” does not only speak for himself/herself but also for the context in which he is located. The passage, however, from the individual to the “typical individual”

opens up innumerable problems, and on this point the research may present ambivalences and vicious circles. What makes it possible to attribute “example” value to some life histories as opposed to others, or to choose and attribute particular explanatory meaning to some events and moments in biographies, etc.?

The criteria that legitimate abstractions such as the construction of typologies is not always clear. On the other hand the legitimation of classification or typing operations must be sought not so much in the method as in the theoretical frameworks underlying the approach and purposes of the research.

And there are cases in which the “example” value of the histories acquired is left, in the final analysis, to a different source of data such as to questionnaires/quantitative survey for example. It is on this basis that the “patterns that emerge from individual experiences” (Bergamaschi 1999, 89), can be appreciated, by assigning the primary function of generalising the results to the questionnaire data and limiting the analysis of the biographical material to a few “emblematic life histories”.

Process, histories, careers, trajectories

As has been said, 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. This assumption generally leads researchers to make use of the notion of a “career” to dynamically observe the case histories of the no abode. In the broad sense of the term in use, careers relate to the different dimensions of which an individual’s existence is composed (family, relationships, work, educational, biological, moral, etc.). They are punctuated by events and go through different phases. They are essentially sequences of life situations, of states and transitions that develop in specific contexts of social interaction.

There is a recurrent use of this notion in the research on the no abode and of some of the concepts related to it (“phases”, “events”), which satisfy the objective of interpreting individual biographies as dynamic processes consisting of a multiplicity of interconnected and interdependent trajectories which develop and evolve over time. The concept of “career” enables the transitions that determine the changes of state along the time axis of individual biographies to be interpreted.

As has been said, the biographical approach is appropriate in this sense, consistent with the objective of producing a full and detailed reconstruction of the careers of the no abode.

Nevertheless various problems also arise from this point of view, a certain difficulty in handling the trajectories of the no abode in a full and dynamic manner. The limits are those of the theoretical frameworks of the research on extreme poverty and social exclusion, which lead both the analysis of the paths that have led the no abode into that condition and the analysis of the “careers of the no abode” to start from the moment of arrival on the street. In this case too it is quite evident that the problem is not so much with the method itself as with the conceptions and the theoretical frameworks underlying the analysis.

“Taking the traditional/mainstream stance of research into extreme poverty and social marginalisation, the paths, trajectories and careers of the no abode are understood as ‘regressive life paths’” (Meo 2000, 170-171).

As concerns the paths that have led 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” (Pieretti 2001), others of “precipitating” or “disrupting events” (Meo 2000; Bergamaschi 1999). 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 inevitably lead to the experience of life on the streets.

As, however, concerns the career of the no abode starting from the moment of arrival on the streets, this tends, in the research examined, 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). The focus is concentrated on the processes of adapting to street life from the moment in which an individual arrives there. “The condition of the “new homeless”, “the adaptation phase” and the “chronic homeless” represent typical phases in the careers of the no abode.

A no abode as a person in a condition of social exclusion/extreme poverty is one of the aspects over which agreement is most common in definitions of the “no abode” in Italy.

“The no abode are marginalised people without the resources and the motivation required to obtain housing in the present and in the near future” (Pellegrino, Verzieri 1991; Berzano 1991).

In effect, conceptualised as such, 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.

In this respect, it must be remarked that the definition of the typical sequences of the careers of the no abode does not protect against the risks of reduction presented by categories (drug addiction, alcoholism, mental illness, etc.) constructed on the basis of the “causes of the drift onto the streets” (Bonadonna 2001, 42).

This idea of process and multi-dimensionality is one possible framework. Many criticisms have been made in recent years of the process idea cultivated in studies of social exclusion (Soulet 1999). Recently, criticisms have come from the “new dynamic approaches” to poverty. These criticisms move along two lines. They criticise above all the idea that poverty is normally or frequently a stable condition and is determined by progressive deterioration. This criticism concerns the prevalent notions of the progressive and cumulative nature of exclusion processes and the idea that downward drift processes are in some way inherent to the dynamics of poverty in themselves.

The criticisms also indicate the usefulness of adopting contingent and non deterministic models able to “take account of the variety of possible pathways to poverty, with shorter or longer periods in poverty, continuous and discontinuous trajectories, spirals downwards and cumulative declines or flights from poverty, and so on to show the heterogeneity of the poor from a chronological viewpoint also” (Leisering 2003).

In principle it may be assumed 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”. It is possible however that 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.

Both these issues are widely discussed in the short paper.

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