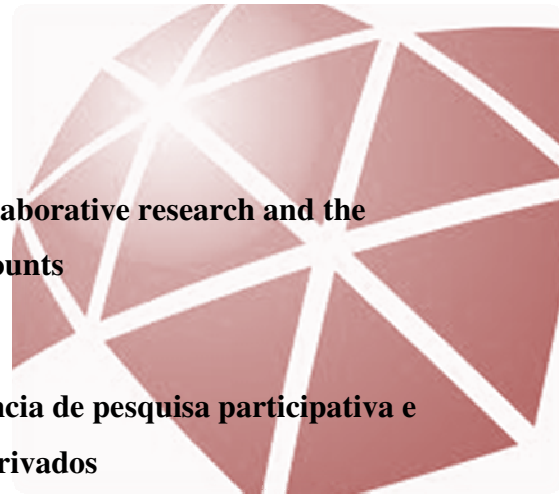


Biographical research among immigrants in Portugal: collaborative research and the analytical relevance of personal accounts

Pesquisa biográfica junto de imigrantes em Portugal: experiência de pesquisa participativa e relevância analítica dos testemunhos privados



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Abstract: This work is a result of the project *Research on migration and biographical approach: building a collaborative work in the Portuguese context*, developed at the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra and funded by the Portuguese National Science Foundation [FCT]. This study is a collaborative work proposal between social science researchers and immigrants residing in that city in the center of Portugal. More specifically, it seeks to study and understand the migration experience of immigrants with very diverse backgrounds and profiles who chose - in one way or another - to live in the city of Coimbra. The objectives of departure of this work derive from our privileged focus on the experiences and biographical accounts of our interlocutors: 1) what is the perspective of migrants on their migratory experience? 2) what is the impact of the biographical research on the lives of migrants and host society? 3) how can the subjects be acknowledged for more than just research purposes? It is proposed here to make a reflection in dialogue with the theoretical frameworks of emancipatory biographical research as well as with shared or participatory research in social sciences.

Keywords: biography; migration; immigration; biographical accounts.

Resumo: O presente texto é resultado do projeto *Pesquisa das migrações e abordagem biográfica: construindo um trabalho em colaboração no contexto português*, desenvolvido no Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra e financiado pela Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia. Este estudo é uma proposta de trabalho em colaboração entre investigadores das ciências sociais e imigrantes residentes naquela cidade do centro de Portugal. Mais especificamente, procura-se estudar e conhecer a experiência migratória de imigrantes com origens e perfis muito diversos que escolheram - de uma forma ou de outra - a cidade de Coimbra para viver. Os objectivos de partida do trabalho decorrem do nosso foco privilegiado nas experiências e relatos biográficos dos sujeitos nossos interlocutores: 1) qual a perspectiva dos migrantes sobre sua experiência migratória? 2) qual o impacto da pesquisa biográfica na vida dos migrantes e sociedade de imigração? 3) como reconhecer os sujeitos interlocutores para além de um propósito meramente objectificante da pesquisa? Propõe-se aqui fazer uma reflexão, em diálogo com os referenciais teóricos da pesquisa biográfica emancipatória, bem como da pesquisa partilhada ou participativa em ciências sociais.

Palavras-chave: biografia; migração; imigração; relatos biográficos.

1. Introduction

In the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, we are developing the project *Pesquisa das migrações e abordagem biográfica: construindo um trabalho em colaboração no contexto português* (*Research of migrations and biographic approach: developing a collaborative work in the Portuguese context*), which is funded by the the Portuguese National Science Foundation.¹ This research is presented as a collaborative work proposal among social science investigators and immigrants residing in Coimbra, a city located in the center of Portugal. More specifically, we are looking to study the migratory experience of immigrants of different origins and profiles in Coimbra drawing from their own biographical accounts.

The main objective of this work is a result of our privileged focus on lived experiences and biographic accounts produced by our interlocutors: 1) what is the immigrant's perspective on his/her migratory experience?; 2) what is the impact of biographic research in the lives of the immigrants and host societies?; 3) how can the subjects be acknowledged for more than just research purposes?

To this end, we ventured into the field; not only did we research and analyze the Portuguese legislation on immigration; we also investigated media discourses on the matter in Portugal. The confrontation between the normative discourse on immigration and the actual immigrant experiences "in flesh and blood" constitutes a central aspect of our analytic work, of our methodological proposal based on biographical workshops (LECHNER, 2012), and our effort to raise awareness through audiovisual outputs that will be produced by the project (the documentary film).

The present article aims to present this work carried out in biographical workshops or accounts told by immigrants, discussing the heuristic value and social status of such private testimonies. What do biographic accounts on behalf of the immigrants bring to the migration study? What is the potential and the limits of a testimony produced in a group effort? These questions will be further discussed in dialog with the theoretical references of emancipatory biographical research and collaborative or participatory research within the social sciences.

2. Biographical research with volunteer immigrant groups

The project referred to this article is based on the theoretical references of emancipatory biographic research (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2012; LECHNER, 2009), in tune with the work of Paulo Freire (1967, 1969) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003, 2008) aimed at a civic epistemology work (JASANOFF, 2004a, 2004b). We sought to uncover the biographic experiences

of immigrants in Portugal based on their own stories revealed during individual interviews, informal encounters, and biographical workshops (LECHNER, 2012) or group accounts.

Between 2011 and 2014, we held four workshops with different groups, which were quite heterogeneous. Despite the initial struggle to recruit volunteers, the attempts attracted the first contacts, which created opportunities to meet with immigrant communities, public institutions, and services provided by the State that materialized an increasing engagement between the research team, the volunteers, and local institutions. During the second year of the project, the fieldwork consisted, precisely, on contacting institutions and people willing to make biographical workshops available to potential volunteers. We also carried out meetings and individual interviews with participants on the field. We had our first meeting with the Social Network of the Municipal Chamber of Coimbra (CMC) in January, 2012.

This meeting helped to give exposure to the project; thus, receiving formal support while searching for volunteers. Consequently, new meetings were scheduled between the investigation team and the CMC's social action technicians, which placed us in contact with immigrants residing in the city of Coimbra: Housing Service, Cartão Família (social welfare program), in particular. We organized a meeting with the City Council's Housing Service in the Ingote neighborhood on January 30th, 2012, date in which we recruited some volunteers for the workshops. Others had already been recruited in the university, which holds a great percentage of foreign students with a legal immigrant status in Portugal and that seemed to be open and interested in participating. We contacted approximately 100 people in total, and maintained regular contact with 20 of them. The institutions and mediators played a decisive part in this stage of the collaborative work.

In June of 2012, we made a public presentation of the project on the occasion of the seminar “Rumina@ções urbanas:² conte a sua cidade numa roda de histórias” (Urban reflections: tell us about your city in a “table of voices”)", at Casa da Cultura. This seminar counted with the participation of some immigrants previously contacted, as well as the city council responsible for the Cultural & Education Service. After these contacts, we were able to organize two biographical workshops (July and October of 2012). In the first workshop, only students participated (originally from five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Cape Verde, China, Ukraine); in the second workshop, we counted on the presence of a mixed, heterogeneous group of people (students, non-students, one illiterate immigrant) from seven different countries: Angola, Australia, Brazil, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, São Tomé, Uzbekistan. Each one of these workshops lasted three days and followed the same structure and protocol of exercises (listen, share, echoes) analyzed in the article previously mentioned and dedicated to the biographical workshops. (LECHNER, 2012).

The conduction of these two biographical workshops made possible to identify main subjects that should be further discussed during the project's analysis. These subjects refer to the experience of discrimination (twice or three times as much when referring to immigrant women who are black or Brazilian, whether they are single or divorced), racism – especially on the part of public services directly targeted at immigrants (such as the customer service by the Foreigners and Frontiers Service) –, and the importance of Churches and religions in welcoming and representing solidarity networks for immigrants. Both discrimination and racism seem to be involved in a cloak of unawareness on behalf of those that exert these practices, against which the biographical workshops contribute a lot to, due to the circular and horizontal format of dialogs and their forming and transforming effects. In June 2013, we held a workshop exclusively on the subject of religions with the participation of seven different religions (Baptist, Catholic, Spiritism, *Candomblé*, Messianic, Mormon, Muslim) in which different participants described their amazement in seeing and feeling so much respect between people of different faiths.

Contacting the volunteers of the project and the biographic workshops unveiled what a challenge it was to try to collaborate in asymmetric social contexts. And, due to the fact this structural difference became tangible in our research experience between the university and the “real” immigration world (which was less evident during the first workshop with students), we organized the third and fourth workshops directly focused on women³ (March, 2013) and religion (June, 2013), which enabled us to learn other experiences that brought a greater level of alterity to our collaborative work. In this confrontation of realities, we learned, for example, about the existence of a Mosque in the city of Coimbra, which was unknown even to the Social Network of the City Council. In fact, our project conveyed the existence of the Mosque to the technicians working at the City Council of Coimbra.

With that said, we realized how collaboration in social or statutory asymmetric contexts (between natives/foreigners; scholars/illiterates, etc.) leads to asymmetric reciprocities (TEMPLE, 2003) that bring alterity to the core of our collaborative work process with immigrants, enhancing mutual learning and potentially transforming dialog. On the other hand, both mutual learning and transforming dialog may lead to an innovative action in the collective sphere. In order for this to happen, it is necessary for both parties to act within and beyond the defined social statuses. In the words of Temple, ‘the material value of the exchange should not overlap the symbolic value of sharing’. That is, the symbolic values associated to the various social statuses at the starting point should not hinder the possibility of transforming their weight on the shared production of common responsibility and authorship. This is where we encounter new challenges, particularly on the

relationship and communication between people of different cultures, mother tongues, and languages.

Nevertheless, one of the most useful tools to work "within" these theoretical, methodological, and civic challenges of collaboration is the registration and analysis of images of the work process itself. Therefore, we have filmed and recorded all of the hours put into the biographic workshops (60 hours) with the authorization of all participants. Initially, only one participant did not want to be filmed. However, just after providing his testimony (one of the first) on the discrimination and racism he experienced at the service desk of the Foreigners and Frontiers Service (Loja do Cidadão), he himself acknowledged the importance of making his experience known to a broad and anonymous audience. This way, we have a very rich audiovisual *corpus*, object of topic-oriented analysis that will be a part of the project's documentary film that we will produce with the volunteers on the subject of immigration.

3. Heuristic value of biographic testimonies

In the introduction of this article, we presented our intention of discussing the heuristic and social value of biographic testimonies. We also asked what can biographic accounts bring to a migration study and what are the potentials and limits of a private testimony shared with the group during the workshops.

In order to try to meet these challenges, first, we have to remember the history behind biographic studies in social sciences, particularly in sociology and anthropology. Posterior emergence and developments of the biographic research are not dissociated from their respective social, political, and civilizational contexts in which they occur. Changes incurred in the social sciences and liberal arts throughout the 20th century enabled the interest and production of researches about non-factual history (New History), the interpretation in search of contextualized meanings (anthropology), and the meanings people attribute to their social experiences (sociology).

The Chicago School is appointed as the mother of qualitative sociology, responsible for classic studies such as *The Polish peasant in Europe and America* carried out in the 1920s by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, which was based on the analysis of correspondence and biographic accounts of Polish peasants that migrated to the USA. Suzie Guth, author of the book *Chicago 1920: aux origines de la sociologie qualitative*, calls the work of Thomas and Znaniecki "a new anthropology", by which the direct knowledge of immigrant individuals, families, and communities in Chicago allowed for the theoretical study of the concept of social disorganization of a community in a given era. (GUTH, 2004, p. 79-97).

Later in the USA, symbolic interactionism developed the study of human relations based on the enormous social and cultural transformations of that time, not restricted to limited interactions between people. (BLUMER, 1951). However, it was during the 1980s in Europe that the interest to study life stories and biographic accounts flourished, with authors Franco Ferrarotti and Daniel Bertaux. In 1981, *Biography and Society: The life-history approach in the social sciences*, a collection of texts compiled by Bertaux regarding the biographic approach in social sciences, was published in English by SAGE. In this volume, Ferrarotti's contribution is the most directly devoted to the epistemological and philosophical matters of biographic studies. Based on Sartre's existentialism, the Italian sociologist developed the core of specificity regarding the biographic approach, which he considers residing in its *totalizing* nature. Phenomenology and dialectic materialism converge in Sartre's theory aiming to adjust to the relation between the individual and the collective, the biographic and the social, and the historic mode of comprehending individual identities. Ferrarotti follows this dialectical reasoning to build a hermeneutic, nonlinear model of perspective and mediation analysis that exists between agency and structure, individuals and societies, denominated by the author as *synthetic praxis*.

The heuristic potential of biography together with its subjective and historic nature bring forward the need for social scientists to study this human *praxis* as a synthetic process. In other words, a synthesis between two ingredients often opposite, which, however, complement each other: individual and society, agency and structure. Therefore, the unrenounced subjectivity in social analysis allows comprehending, through life stories and biographic accounts, the respective interpretations of the objective aspects of social life. What and how is it like to live in another country without a passport or valid documents, for example? What is and how does it feel to be discriminated for being black, Asian, or a woman in the country of immigration?

These questions, as well as the way we formulate them, refer to the multidimensionality of the biographic analysis: in order to learn of migratory experiences from real people we have to resort to their narratives and life experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to induce speech in our interlocutors, by raising matters, making questions, and interacting with them (without forgetting our subject positions).

Knowing the answers implies acknowledging constraints of the interaction situation, the potentials and limits of the relation and social statutes/relations of power and knowledge implied. That is why, in order to attain knowledge of what a discrimination experience (for example) is like for the person who is talking to us, a map and an encounter trajectory must to be designed. In other words, the course and objective of the research must be followed in order to account for the investigation process. Only after this honest examination the testimony of the narrator can be

effectively comprehended and, from there, one can extract the theoretical knowledge regarding the topic in question. In other words, we move from the enunciation context (private) of a topic to the topic in context of social analysis.

The biographic research serves two analytical purposes, on one hand, to raise awareness of ways of living and get to know the specific interpretation of the narrator. On the other hand, to know the social and political meaning of such private experiences (biographic accounts) thus gathering a collective knowledge enabled by the research on these accounts.

However, this utility does not come seamlessly. It requires two supplementary exercises that we will refer to later due to the hermeneutic of the relation in biographic research: ethic dimension and, also, the technical and aesthetic dimensions of the work produced. The *return of the subject* in social sciences or the *clinical pole* in sociology, mentioned by Ferrarotti, revolves around a humanist paradigm that, “serving as a manifest”, radicalized the virtues of biography in a given time without taking into consideration its “problematic scope”. (CONDE, 1993, p. 45). Idalina Conde finds this problem within the difficult dialog between theory and biography. If biography has a totalizing or singularizing nature, if it serves nomothetic (proposition of the law) or ideographic (representations) purposes, if cannot serve to foresee behavior and establish sociological laws (defense of its ideographic nature), then, it cannot function by itself; it would require a theoretical and epistemological compass in order to justify from the starting point the methodological preferences for the study of biographies.

In this sense, the heuristic value of biographic accounts and narratives in social sciences depends on a theory guiding each research and on adjacent procedural theories. More than a general theory regarding the subject – which would imply a necessarily partial and problematic starting point – applicable to each and every one of the studies with life stories, biographic research executes contextual theories of subjects. Therefore, the valuable contribution it may offer to social analyses lies on the intensive and in-depth knowledge of a given topic (broadened to its particular multidimensionality), guided by a theoretic-practical objective clearly defined at the starting point. This is the case of many studies carried out by the anthropology of migrations, which resort to interviews and biographic accounts of immigrants to understand transnational movements, transcontinental family dynamics, or post-colonial migrations. (GLICK-SCHILLER; FOURON, 2001).

The biographic accounts not only bring to migration research the necessary information regarding the migratory experience of real people in a given migratory context (international, interregional, or transcontinental), but also (in)form the narrator and narratees about the conditions for a potential discourse regarding this life experience. In this sense, as Christine Delory-

Momberger (2014) says, biographic research is inevitably interventionist. It is research-action. For the effects of the research itself surpass the strictly scientific objectives of the investigation work. An analysis of situational and relational limitations of the research, as referred to above, as well as the forming and transforming effects of biographic research (interventionist and emancipatory) enables to identify in each specific study the procedural theories associated or adjacent to the main theory used as a guideline for the research.

Therefore, we can more easily distinguish between sociological research that resorts to biographic material, and anthropological researches based on life stories, or historiographic research regarding social memory. In addition, we can more clearly identify the specificity of emancipatory biographic research that is closest to public sociology or to collaborative anthropology/ethnography. Quoting Delory-Momberger:

Taking into consideration the very definition of the project, biographic research is closest to *participative* or *collaborative* research. In other words, it is a part of types of research that, whether conducted or co-construed with social actors, follow (according to each case and at different levels) the individual and collective objectives of development, enhancement of resources and potentialities, production and exchange of knowledge, emancipation, power of action, and social and political transformation. (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2012).

In this sense, the hermeneutics of the relation or ethic dimension of the biographic research is subject to analysis and reflection regarding three great challenges bestowed by the social sciences: asymmetric reciprocities, mutuality of competencies between the persons involved, and coauthoring. On the other hand, the aesthetic and technical dimensions (even technological with the use of audiovisual materials and hypermedia) of the collaborative work raises new matters while bringing new creative and comprehensive answers to the epistemological proposal of the biographic research. We believe that the tangible and intangible results of our collaborative research with immigrants, for instance, address the theoretical challenges described above through technique and aesthetic.

4. Potentials and limits of private testimony produced within the group

Lastly, this article has to refer to the specificities of biographic testimonies produced in a group effort in order to analyze their potential and limits.

In the project that comprised biographic workshops with immigrants in the city of Coimbra, we identified four analytical dimensions regarding the accounts produced within the group: linguistic, performative, mnemonic, and political.

As acts of language: they are constituted in a time and space of a particular enunciation; they are transitory, changeable, alive, and are incessantly reconfigured in the present moment they are expressed. They are never *definite*. They reconstruct the meaning of the life experiences. They translate *narrative identities*. (RICOEUR, 1983).

As performative acts: they make the narrators subjects/characters of their private history. The narrators become the subjects of a shared story in which the similarities and differences, the common and uncommon aspects of the identities are more clearly identified. They transform sharing into a fountain of knowledge that evidences the body's role in the life experience and narration. They place the body in tune with comprehending life experiences and the knowledge produced (the body is an archive of memories; a place of experience; a place to express or silence; a place of resistance and creativity or of vindication of identity and/or rights).

As acts of memory: they weave life experience with the threads of the present, (re)construct a story from the past, build a congruence between the present and the past, construe an image or figure of the subject that reappropriates him/herself and, with this, defines a new identity. They build bridges that project in the future (subject-project).

As political acts: they translate a reflexive competency of the subjects that allows them to acknowledge their own rights (as citizens and as human beings) and sociopolitical contexts of existence. They translate forms of resistance to dominant political or discursive regimes. They translate one vision of the history among others. (refer to ADICHIE, 2007). They produce non-hegemonic forms of knowledge.

The readers may confirm how the four dimensions of biographic accounts announce a program that goes beyond pedagogy. It concerns a framework of comprehension and action on learning and knowledge, devoted to an effective dialog between subjects, regarding diversity and reflexivity. Therefore, it is pertinent to equate it with the theory of the ecology of knowledges by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), which greatly explains the need to think and act, within the social sciences and liberal arts, beyond the traditional point of view or *abyssal thinking* that characterizes modern science.

The statute and use of autobiographic narrative in the migratory context, more specifically, reveals the weight of this abyss between real-life experiences of people and normative, official, and institutionalized discourses. A radical example concerns the requests of asylum seekers that are subject to a truly *institutional translation* (GIORDANO, 2009) in order to comply with the expectations of the administration of the States, the police, judges, or charity services that, in the end, will decide for the acceptance of the story told and consequent legal acceptance of the applicant.

In the biographic workshops with immigrants, we are not facing such an oppressive or embarrassing institutional setting. In fact, they intend to be a safe, comforting, and trustworthy environment for all participants. In this setting, each person narrates his/her autobiographic migration account, ensuring that all the works of the life-story chain being produced acknowledge the forming and transforming power of these accounts (Namely, PINEAU, 1983, 1989, 2006; JOSSO, 2010). We also identified the effects of validation, appreciation, and emancipation of the shared accounts. Each person withdraws from their solitude, hears other stories, shares his/her experience, which by itself reveals a potential to transform social relations. Overall, the workshops are very powerful when it comes to understanding stereotypes, the way they work, and the clear insufficiency to explain identities and intercultural relations. In fact, the participants denounce the undesired results of these stereotypes (i.e.: “the Brazilian woman”, “the Chinese”, “the Africans”), the real-life experiences of these projections and introjections (when the stereotype is incorporated or undertook) to later deconstruct them spontaneously as a group.

As limits to these accounts, we find with Delory Momberger (2014) four inevitabilities of the narrations in asymmetry contexts (as it would be in an academic research): the word is not a given fact (the silences and acts of silencing can be dominant); the narratives are often a reproduction of pre-produced discourses (by the media and common sense); the biographic account is not a universal model (it is not practiced nor accepted, for that matter, or simply does not make any sense in many cultures); the narratives are intersected by dominant discourses (and mother-tongues, subjectivity or objectification languages) with which the narrators and narratees identify with in their own way.

However, we understand these limitations as a challenge or even a potentiality, since they test our definition of biographic research, pointing to a sense of more clarity and justification (its legitimacy and pertinence) in the context of migratory studies. Moreover, together with the technical and aesthetic dimensions described earlier, they transform the work with biographic accounts of immigrants into an extremely rich source of knowledge and transformation of social injustices. We return to the merits of the work carried out in the 1920s, regarding the qualitative analyses driven by a theory and procedural instruments adequate to the time and place of the investigation.

Conclusion

In this text, we presented a biographic research with immigrants in Portugal based on a participative research experience in Coimbra, reflecting on the analytical relevance of first person

accounts. To this end, we presented the investigation project in which we conducted biographic workshops with immigrants: their theoretical-methodological assumptions, phases, participants, embodiments. Once the most detailed framework of this work is designed, we continue by analyzing the heuristic value of the biographical accounts, recalling the history of biographic studies in social sciences, particularly in sociology and anthropology.

Lastly, this small effort towards the progress of the state of the art led us to analyze the potentials and limits of the work with biographic group accounts in the study of migration. Here, we presumed to think of the limits also as a theoretical and creative potential that congregates the different analytical and expressive dimensions of biographic research. In the end, we believed we could contribute to a broader coherence between discourse and practice of collaborative or participative researches, as it is necessarily the case with the work with people who trust us, researchers, to better acknowledge, understand, and raise awareness to the complexity of the migratory phenomena and its social, political, and historic contexts. Without further ado, we can move forward toward construing a biographic research that is effectively close to the people who we work with in our fields of analysis.

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Notes

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² This title plays with the word "action", indicating a double function of the group accounts: reflect (talk, ponder, raise awareness) and act on the subject or area in debate: in this case, the city.

³ Workshop held at Centro de Acolhimento João Paulo II with a group of women from Brazil, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Ukraine, who are beneficiaries of the center's welfare assistance.

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