Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education

Research on the Education and Learning of Adults

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Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education

Case Studies in Methodology and Theory

Edited by

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ESREA is a European scientific society. It was established in 1991 to provide a European-wide forum for all researchers engaged in research on adult education and learning and to promote and disseminate theoretical and empirical research in the field. Since 1991 the landscape of adult education and learning has changed to include more diverse learning contexts at formal and informal levels. At the same time there has been a policy push by the European Union, OECD, UNESCO and national governments to promote a policy of lifelong learning. ESREA provides an important space for these changes and (re)definition of adult education and learning in relation to research, theory, policy and practice to be reflected upon and discussed. This takes place at the triennial conference, network conferences and through the publication of books and a journal.

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MIRELLA FERRARI

4. TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

*Learning from Young Adults through the Exploratory Use of
Multiple Methods*

INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses a study in Lombardy, Northern Italy, involving care leavers, i.e. young people who came of age while living in fosterage (children's homes and/ or foster families), and had experienced professional intervention in their lives (social workers, in-home assistants, special educators, psychotherapists, etc.). The research is based on the use of multiple methods (critical quantitative research, auto/ biographical methods and cooperative inquiry) to explore the transition to adulthood in distressed lives and to interrogate the learning processes occurring amidst the foster care system.

The years between 18 and 21 are crucial in the transitions young adults make from the 'protection' of the foster care system to the 'agency' of adulthood. Welfare services in Italy offers 'administrative extension' as a special program aimed at supporting this transition, but there is not much research on this process. We wish to explore the learning at many levels produced through and in this "foster care system". Is this learning conducive to the exercise of agency, freedom, self-direction, reflexivity, and a meaningful life? How does this system respond to families and their children made vulnerable by poverty, lack of support from the social community, immigration, etc.?

A critical, thoughtful and 'care-full' appreciation of such forms of social intervention needs to be undertaken. The main focus of professionals and decision makers is on the economic, social, and individual psychological aspects but there is little understanding of specific learning factors intervening in the process of identity building, life and career design, relationship building, and meaning making. Addressing this requires innovative, multi-stranded forms of research.

We started our research by reviewing existing quantitative data on the topic. Numbers, however, do not tell us very much about meaning making. So, we moved towards a qualitative and participatory research framework involving a group of care leavers and professionals as well, to gain a fuller view of the phenomenon, focusing on the insiders' perspective. We used auto/biographic methods (Merrill & West, 2009) as well as cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Formenti, 2008) to create

a basis for shared reflection and reflexivity. In our view, these methods are useful to promote learning and agency through participants' critical reflection and active participation and, in this sense, they are coherent with our view of adult education as an emancipatory project.

THE SCENARIO: COLLECTING DATA ON A COMPLEX PHENOMENON

Protection and fosterage[1] of minors and people without a family, or whose family is considered not to have enough care resources, has been the topic of recent discussions and debates in Italy, but remains under-researched by social scientists.

Systematic research on best practices and models of social services is lacking. It is concerning that none of the six countries considered by the 4th ANCI (Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani – National Association of Municipalities) Report (Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Belgium and Spain) produced regular comprehensive statistics (ANCI, 2012, p. 19); and this absence of a standard model to collect comparable data hinders the development of regional macro-level profiles.

Current research provides a partial and fragmented view of what occurs in fosterage. There is a need to provide greater context for research. For our study, it is important to focus on the 18–21 age group, since the minors who were in foster care are not automatically discharged after their coming of age (Belotti, 2010). Some of them volunteer to receive further support until they are 21 years old, by entering a program called 'administrative extension'. It entails constraints, monitoring, and semi-autonomy in work and living for varying periods of duration.

Fosterage is a complex and layered system, a network of agencies and actors, comprising municipalities, the juvenile court, the local social services for minors (connected to health, care, and education services), the private agencies that rule residences (*comunità minori, case-famiglia, comunità mamma-bambino*, etc.) and offer educational support to minors and families, local networks of foster families), and a panoply of professionals (social workers, psychologists, educators, neuropsychiatrists, and other doctors).

The Municipality (local social services) is legally responsible for monitoring and assessing the progress of minors in foster care. The ANCI Report (2012) highlights difficulties due to general economic shortages, as well as other issues that may hinder good and more effective systemic cooperation: the need to fix national standards for services; a more attentive focus on minors' needs; the promotion of a culture of foster care; the enhancement of previous experiences; the need for greater coordination between the different actors of minors' protection; and monitoring to identify best practices.

Different datasets give us diverse pictures of the sector. ISTAT (2013) identify 28,449 minors in foster care along Italian territory in 2013 and map residential structures: 36% owned by non-profit organizations; 25% for-profit; 24% public administration; 14% religious institutions. Most structures (94%) have more than 10 beds.

In Italy, at 31/12/2014, 12,400 minors (1.2‰) were hosted in residential structures and 14,020 in foster families.[2] The law, in line with the convention for the rights of the child, recommends family fosterage. However, existing data (unfortunately coming from different sources which are not comparable) show an overall growth in institutionalization, as reported by the Children's Authority[3] in 2015.

Surveys[4] show many reasons for separation: relational problems within the family are frequently mentioned, as well as parental inadequacy due to addiction or neglectful behavior. The living conditions and problems of these families are diverse, and poverty is among the factors of children's outplacement, which should not be the case in a democratic society that respects children and citizen's rights.

Gender and ethnic backgrounds are also relevant: numbers of males in care are increasing due to the higher presence of unaccompanied foreign minors; their nationality depends on changing migratory flows: from Romania and Morocco at the beginning (Belotti, 2010), then Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Albania (ANCI, 2012), and more recently Middle-East and Central Africa. Institutionalization becomes a solution for adolescents (or undocumented young adults), who are not vulnerable in the ordinary sense.

Age groups and length of treatment also vary: the adolescent group has been growing recently, as well as those in 'short stay' (less than 24 months), although the average duration of stay is four years. Young adults (18–21) are also increasing in administrative extension.

After fosterage, following Belotti (2010), 50% of careleavers decide to re-enter the family (family of origin, relatives, acquaintances, etc.); 11% begin their journey in autonomy with the search for a job. Foreign young adults tend to choose autonomy three times more than Italians. According to the ISTAT survey[5] (2013) 8% of care leavers become independent, while 31% returns to their family of origin and 24% go into secondary care protection.

These surveys and available databases[6] tend to be focused on the protection of minors and Children's Rights[7] and to rely almost exclusively on quantitative data. While quantitative surveys can be useful in certain respects they depend on simple forms of categorization that blur significant differences, and underestimate the influence of contexts on people's lives.

In general, many seem to 'disappear' from statistics as soon as they come of age. The fosterage system is focused on minors, and to a lesser extent on young adults (18–21 age class), its philosophy being based on protection and children's rights, not least for economic reasons: the money preferably goes where 'children' (and not 'adults') are in distress.

THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: LOOKING FOR STORIES WITHIN A PARTICIPATORY FRAMEWORK

In our experience, stories have a great potential in illuminating processes of learning that shape the development of an adult identity; we want to use this potential to focus

on the learning biographies of people who are or have been under State 'protection' (that also entails control), until they come, or have come, of age. Our research is then positioned on the verge of a transition, hence a transitional learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2000) that deserves attention. In our view these processes may be explored through qualitative methods to complement the statistical picture outlined above. Narrative materials, specifically, may offer a deeper sense of these young adults' experience than quantitative data.

From the perspective of complexity theory (Osberg & Biesta, 2010; Alhadeff-Jones, 2012) and the systemic approach (Formenti, 2008, 2011, 2015), learning trajectories are not only individual paths, but entangled processes where macro, meso and micro levels are intertwined and inter-dependent. We are especially interested in understanding the action of meaningful *learning contexts* (Edwards, Biesta & Thorpe, 2009) that shape stories and 'reveal' hidden perspectives of meaning, personal and collective scripts and myths, and worldviews (Formenti, West, & Horsdal, 2014). Someone who tells her/his biography is not only 'revealing' her/his path, but making (performing) a representation of structures and discourses in the larger society, family, proximal group, and present situation. Biographical research is deeply aware of the action of dominant discourses and narratives, cultural models, processes of stigmatization etc., in shaping and organizing stories.

How do different systems and narratives connect in these young adults' lives? They grew in different places: original family, foster family(ies) and/or children's housing, school, groups, communities. Each place had its own framework, hence forcing the child to adapt. Were the different contexts and frameworks coherent and easy to compose, or did they clash? And eventually, was this clash able to generate disorienting dilemmas that triggered transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2009), or were they only dis-orienting and hindering the construction of a sense of identity?

Besides, which kind of transitional spaces (West & Carlson, 2007) were able to foster emancipatory learning? Which kind of guidance (Reid, 2016) – or other meaningful relationships – was offered to these young adults to allow what has been called "biographicity" (Alheit & Dausien, 2000); that is the possibility to develop a new script, a different identity/theory of oneself, and awareness of one's context, that entails a deep understanding of the action of social determinants in one's life, that enables the subject to re-design it in more adaptive and meaningful terms?

Sampling and the Involvement of Professionals

The study is currently being carried out in Lombardy, Italy. We started with auto/biographical interviews with a small sample of care leavers (7 males and 3 females, from 18 to 28 years old). Sampling, in this study, is a constitutive part of the research itself. It is the result of a process that was extremely useful to produce reflection and reflexivity. To build our 'sample', and to test some ideas about interviews, we started by addressing professionals who are working within residential units for minors, in order to reflect together upon our assumptions and ongoing outcomes. We involved

some of them in our research from the very beginning, since their perspective is entangled and complementary to that of the care leavers'; they are *insiders* of the same context, they participate in many common events and conversations, they co-construct narratives all the time.

Our sampling is not meant to be representative of all the features or categories we are interested in, but we asked the professionals to contact a diverse group of young adults who had left their units, keeping in mind the different variables we had focused in the meeting: gender, participants in administrative extension programs and care leavers at 18 years, migrants and Italians, perpetrators of crimes, achievers, etc.

Method

We designed a narrative open interview to enter the topic, asking the participant to speak from his/her own position and experience. This part of the interview was delicate and aimed to build authentic relationships of trust and interest in order to create a dialogical and 'good enough' space (West & Carlson, 2007) to open possibilities for reciprocal learning and reflection. We were conscious that these young adults are 'experts' in doing interviews and might have developed 'scripts' related to stories that can (and cannot) be told in meetings (with psychologists, social workers, educators) whose aims are markedly instrumental for both sides. In practical terms this entailed starting a conversation with each participant about the aims and logic of the research before starting the interview. We used the consent forms as a first step to propose a cooperative stance, in order to engage our interlocutors in becoming co-researcher about an experience they lived firsthand.

The interview started with an open question: *This interview is about your experience ... from which point would you like to begin?* Then we let the narration flow, as the teller decided to shape it. The interviewer played an active role through his/her responses that were non-verbal and verbal (asking, for example, more details about a fact or to clarify an assertion). While the interviews were openly structured, we ensured to cover four main topics: practical things about present and future, education and training, relationship with foster system and becoming an adult.

This interview was a first step as we contacted participants afterwards to check the transcript and to possibly have further meetings if they agreed between the participants and the professionals to bring about a collective ongoing process of data interpretation and discussion. Our aim is to co-construct a 'good enough' (West & Carlson, 2007) theory, using co-operative inquiry as a method of research that "involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycles in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it" (Heron, 1996, p. 1). This choice entails the idea of research as a possibility of advancement in knowledge, i.e. learning for all the participants, in terms of critical and complex thinking, knowledge building and sensemaking, deliberate action, and reflexivity.

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CASE STUDY: MARCO'S STORY

The interviews show different ways of self-positioning in a complex relational system, where mothers and fathers, schoolmates, mentors, professionals, can become resources of hope in the transformative process or obstacles in growing one's own sense of positioning and agency. The stories appear influenced by the larger society, dominant discourses and cultural models, but there is also agency, individuality, and critical thinking. There are supportive relationships, recognition, and 'good enough' spaces for learning (West, 2016). In this sense they illuminate how macro, meso and micro levels are intertwined to shape life trajectories, but, at the same time, also the potential for biographicity (Alheit & Dausien, 2000; Alheit, 2016), when the subject becomes aware of some of these ongoing processes. The following is an example of analysis, based on one participant's (Marco) narrative, that highlights all these interconnected levels.

The macro-level: this is the level where participants position themselves in relation to assumptions, prejudices "floating" in common sense and in social representations (Moscovici, 2003), e.g. 'the vulnerable child' (and consequently vulnerable adult).

At the beginning of his interview, Marco immediately takes a distance from his past ("*a bygone record*") and from a possible prejudice of the listener. "I could tell you about old episodes but I will not play the victim … if this is what is expected from me". He refuses to indulge in the "*negative situation*" he lived at home and that resulted in being moved to a child residence centre. He declares that he remembers few things of living together with his mother ("*alcoholic and depressed*") and his father ("*absent*"). He describes past situations with a sort of detachment "Objectively, I had my problems, but I guess you too, isn't it? […] I could tell you these old episodes but I would not have a distressed attitude … if this is what this experience [the interview] expects from me …". This sort of initial "normalization" of the story seems a kind of reaction to possible prejudices of a stranger (the interviewer) that was interested in a "careleaver experience" based on problems. We can find there some hints of those dominant discourses in relation to which Marco seems ready to actively re-position himself.

The meso-level: this is the level where participants tell about their proximal system of interactions composed by family, foster family, peer group at residence centre, social care professionals, schoolmates, teachers, etc.

Marco during the interview refers to educators and other professionals (social workers and psychologists) working in the social care system. He regrets that too many professionals seem not interested in making a real effort to listen to a child; instead, they put questions in order to interpret or explain his behaviour: "sometimes for professional reasons they forget that they are dealing with children and not with other professionals … I felt more psycho-analyzed than

listened to". The professionals are criticized, as well as desired, as someone who could give attention. This was a titanic endeavour in the residence centre, as other seven young boys were also asking for attention, by crashing doors or coming home under the effect of drugs. How did Marco try to gain the educators' attention? "I always tried to behave as an educator and not as the pupil to be taken care of. I still have all the residence keys, I knew all the educators' shifts, the amount of money given to the other boys … that was my way to get attention". His effort to be on a level with the adults around him often resulted in violent quarrels: "sometimes I provoked someone just for the taste of it, just to face him/her and hold my head high, just to prove that I am not a young boy but your equal, even if I wasn't like that. I felt myself growing up through this feeling of being equal with adults".

Marco also highlighted the role of the other seven young boys living with him at the residence centre as they were fundamental in his learning processes. "You can learn a lot in a children residence centre but not from the educators … from other lives. We were eight young boys with similar and different problems, we were brothers in a certain way … And I learned a lot from their experiences: when my friend Paolo lost his father, when Dario came at the centre as an orphan. Those experiences helped me in growing up and in facing my own problems".

This highlights the children's residence centre as a learning context in itself, beyond the intentions of the educators and social assistants that manage it which is a dimension that is often neglected from professionals.

The micro-level: this is the level where participants deal with their own story and the ways in which it shapes their identity. It is about the representation/myth of themselves that they elaborate in relation to their experiences. It refers to the different ways in which their experience of 'leaving care' is connected with their own current identity.

When Marco left the residence, a difficult period begun for him: "when you go back home you have to manage all the problems that are still there". Even if the residence was considered "home", after leaving he realized that it was also a "bubble" that had not prepared him for the future: going back to his father, no friends, job difficulties, poverty. Marco worked through this, thanks to help he received: his grandparents bought him a car to move and a neighbour found him a job. Now, at 25, Marco is engaged with a 43 year old man "that for me is the best choice as he is youngish – we do the same things – and at the same time he has experience that allows him to be my mentor and my guide". Marco draws a thread between his present relationship with his partner and his previous relationship with the educators: "I am glad when he simply hugs me. But the pupil in the residence has the same desire … he/she's just not interested in someone standing on the other side of the desk and trying to understand

him/her". Today Marco does not consider himself like an adult, as he feels that he "doesn't face the world all alone yet". Living with his boyfriend – and his mother – means that he does not need to care about many fundamental things: "I still have to learn how to manage bills and rent payments …". This advantage has a reverse side: "after 25 years I still don't have a place I consider mine". What makes him feel different and "*more adult*" is a different perspective of himself on him and his life: "the unique thing that makes me proud about my life is that it didn't crash me … I didn't defeat my life and I was not defeated … I just make my life part of myself … I might live it with coldness but I remember it warmly. I don't see my life like a tragedy, I don't see it as either happy or sad. It is the route that I made to get to be myself, as I am now".

CONCLUSIONS

One of our aims, doing this research, is to generate rich and deep enough data in order to challenge linear, deterministic and simplistic perspectives of meaning and commonsense thinking, that may accompany fostered minors (and be internalized by them too). In our first step, we analyzed quantitative surveys and databases, in order to understand the dimensions of the phenomenon and the fundamental factors that are taken into consideration for depicting the wider scenario. This was a fundamental starting point for shaping our research questions and finding an interesting "qualitative space" in which we would have been able to move. Quantitative data are not able to grasp individual differences and trajectories, learning paths, crises, possibilities, and meanings that are developed by subjects, and could explain, for example, why some choose to go back to their families, or not; why some are successful in finding their own way, while others do not. What was lacking, from our point of view, was a deeper knowledge from inside, in order to develop critical research with rather than about these subjects. We didn't elaborate in this chapter on the cooperative inquiry with our insiders and with professionals as we are still in the analysis process, but it is important to highlight how stories were able to trigger reflexive processes and move different points of view (Formenti & West, 2016), especially during the meetings with professionals.

This co-operative dimension was not only a methodological choice but also an epistemological one: vulnerability, in our view, is only partially inherent to the individual: there is always a relational, social, and contextual quality to it. Hence the co-construction of meanings among interacting people involved in the situation with different roles is a crucial moment. Research on education can make a difference on these processes if research contexts are not considered as 'fixed' but as dynamically modified by the interaction between researchers and participants' assumptions. This stance entails a continuous process of self-reflection about the ecology of ideas (Morin, 1995) involved in the conversations. The rhetoric of help and children as victims, for example, while important to bring about the culture of protection and rights, nonetheless becomes a problem when it creates gaps between children

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and adults who are, similarly, in trouble. Even more paradoxically, when a person becomes of age, she seems to abruptly lose every right; besides, the status of 'victim' risks to shadow the force, resilience, and resources of these persons. These young adults have to face, as we said, a dominant narration, entailing a problematic, absent, or abusive family (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004), and the action of 'helpers' who look sometimes more like watchmen and gatekeepers. Nonetheless, it is clear that they develop their own perspectives of meaning, scripts, and worldviews, partly coherent with the system and contexts around them, partly not, sometimes emancipatory, while sometimes they appear closed to further learning. In Marco's case study it is evident the complex dynamic connected to the need of positioning himself in relation to a received narration about 'vulnerability' coming from society in general, family, social services, educators, friends etc. His narration is constantly in dialogue with all these voices and with the researcher's one.

The interviews collected so far illuminate how macro, meso and micro levels are intertwined to shape life trajectories, but also the potential for biographicity (Alheit & Dausien, 2000). Structural and material factors are evident, as well as resources and relational protective factors. We are witnessing, thanks to these amazing stories, how powerful experiences may 'unstick' (Field & Lynch, 2015) these young adults from a self-fulfilling prophecy of lack and failure, overcoming the dilemmas they have to face. We also see hints of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2009) and transitional spaces (West & Carlson, 2007) that were able to foster it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1] We use 'fosterage' and 'foster care' to refer to the practice of bringing up a child outside her/his family, usually on a temporary basis, in a situation where the child's parents remain the acknowledged parents. In Italy, as in many other countries, foster care can be organized in two ways: by giving custody of the child to a foster family or by placing the child in a residence center ('comunità minori'), family-like housing ('casa famiglia') or similar.

[2] http://www.garanteinfanzia.org/news/seconda-raccolta-dati-sperimentale-sui-minorenni-ospiti-delle-comunità

[3] http://www.garanteinfanzia.org/news/seconda-raccolta-dati-sperimentale-sui-minorenni-ospiti-delle-comunità

[4] http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/176622

[5] http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/176622

[6] The most important data sources in Italy are: the 'Istituto degli Innocenti' in Florence (Belotti, 2010); ANCI Cittalia 4th Report (http://www.cittalia.it/index.php/welfare); ISTAT; the governmental National Center for Documentation on Childhood and Adolescence (CNDA), jointly ruled by the Family Policies Department and the Ministry for Social Solidarity (www.minori.it).

[7] http://www.minori.it/; http://www.istitutodeglinnocenti.it/; http://www.gruppocrc.net/

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