

## **Biographical-narrative Research in Iberoamerica: Areas of Development and the Current Situation**

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### **Key words:**

biographical-  
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**Abstract:** Currently, biographical-narrative inquiry has its identity within qualitative research, and it merits attention. This article reviews and describes the biographical-narrative research origin, development and variants in the social sciences of Iberoamerican countries. It offers a broad overview of this field of investigation, defining the main areas of narrative and (auto)biographical inquiry. In this context, it is opted to do a synchronic and a diachronic approach to the current situation. It is based on development and experienced training in this field: 1) It offers a biographical-narrative research characterization about diverse and heterogeneous modalities, methodological variants, forms and dimensions 2) It highlights the roots and the reasons for the current relevance of this approach in social research in the Iberoamerican setting. 3) It describes the main questions and the approach progression, adopting a prospective point of view. 4) It describes the most relevant orientations, the most noteworthy instruments and the key characteristics that must be present in this type of investigation.

### **Table of Contents**

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Biographical-narrative Research](#)
- [3. Defining the Field Under Review](#)
- [4. Origin and Development of the Biographical-narrative Methodology](#)
  - [4.1 Main moments and focal points](#)
  - [4.2 Countries where the biographical-narrative approach develops](#)
  - [4.3 Methodological development within the biographical-narrative approach](#)
- [5. Epilogue and Closing](#)

[References](#)

[Authors](#)

[Citation](#)

## **1. Introduction**

The biographical-narrative approach has acquired an identity within qualitative research, and its origins, development and methodological variants in Iberoamerica will be described in this article. In this review we define a link between biographical investigation and narrative investigation, which first we will clarify. Narrative inquiry is a part of conventional qualitative research, even though there are those who view it as a special approach, distinct from conventional qualitative investigation (POLKINGHORNE, 1995; BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001). On the other hand, biographical investigation is not identified with narrative inquiry, perhaps because there are many biographical studies using quantitative methodology; nevertheless, a large number of biographical studies adopt a narrative methodology. As ATKINSON (2005, p.10)

points out, "narrative is not a unique mode of organising or reporting experience, although it is one pervasive and important way of so doing. Narrative is an important genre of spoken action and representation in everyday life, and in many specialised contexts." Life history and narrative inquiry, then, define their own field of investigation, one which has acquired increased relevance and has been strengthened by the postmodern revealing of grand narratives and claiming of a personal dimension to the social sciences. [1]

Given that the range of qualitative research is very wide (distinct disciplinary areas and countries), in our case we define its borders by considering only biographical-narrative inquiry. In this journal Miguel VALLES and Alejandro BAER (2005) have presented a panoramic review about the past, present and future of qualitative research in Spain. Rather than using a distinct historical and academic perspective, we describe and review the development of this kind of research not only in sociology, although this is one of the main disciplines, but in the social sciences (anthropology and ethnology, sociology, history, linguistics and literary theory, philosophy, psychology and education) in the Iberoamerican countries. In particular we emphasize—due to our own university specialization—studies in the area of education. We include what it has been done in recent decades in Latin America as well as in Spain. Sharing the same language and publishing world makes ideas and research flow from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Furthermore, Spanish exiled to Iberoamerican countries after the Spanish Civil War, created interrelationships among the Spanish speaking countries. In some cases, this was increased by the exiles' later return to Spain, coinciding with the democratization of the Spanish political system. At the same time we also include the Portuguese speaking countries (Portugal and Brazil) which form an integral part of the Iberoamerican community. [2]

Today, narrative inquiry is a place of meeting/intersection of diverse social sciences, and this has lead to its description as "transversal" to these disciplinary fields, a "confused genre" as GEERTZ has said. It includes elements derived from linguistic/literary theory, history (oral history and life history), anthropology (narrative), psychology (life cycles, moral psychology, narrative psychology), hermeneutic philosophy, etc. To put it briefly: 1) *Linguistic and literary theory, based first on structuralism, later semiotics/pragmatism, and finally on the analysis of discourse and narratology, have made relevant contributions to this field.* 2) *History, "oral history" has a long tradition (BORDERÍAS, 1995; VAZQUEZ, 1998), in addition to relevant summaries (BALAN, 1974; MARINAS & SANTAMARINA, 1993; ACEVES, 1993) that have contributed to spreading it.* 3) *Sociology and ethnology: The biographical methodology has primarily been used by Spanish sociologists, as its origin is sociological (the "Chicago School," including numerous fieldwork and theoretical studies (PUJADAS, 1992; De MIGUEL, 1996).* Finally, 4) *Philosophy has had a broad treatment, with monographic studies, the narrativity of Paul RICOEUR (1987, 1996) and other communitarian philosophers (MacINTYRE, 1987; TAYLOR, 1996), who have seen a role for narrative in the constitution of identity, or in the field of moral development and education.* [3]

In this article, therefore, we want to describe and review the state of development of this line of research in the social sciences in the Iberoamerican countries. We make a biographical narratives characterization, in their diverse modalities, forms and dimensions, and then we go on to highlight the reasons for the current relevance this approach is acquiring in educational research. At the same time, the origin and development of this methodology are explained, with regard both to the principles that guide and design the process and the instruments used to collect biographical data. The most innovative methodologies used in the analysis of the biographical interviews and narrative data are described, as well as conventional content analysis. A broad overview will be given of this field of study, defining the principal areas of *narrative inquiry* (narrative anthropology and psychology, narrative studies of organizations, narrative identity, narrative research in education, etc.) and *(auto)biographical inquiry* (autobiography and literature, oral history and life histories, life cycles, career and professional development). Finally, we place special emphasis on the *qualitative methodologies used*, with the specific variants in each field of study or discipline. We deal mostly with the Spanish case, as would be expected, but with the explicit intention to integrate and highlight the best studies and analyses throughout the Iberoamerican countries. [4]

## 2. Biographical-narrative Research

The growth and popularity achieved by narrative inquiry into life stories and biographies may be a response to our current postmodern moment: in a world that has become chaotic and disorganized, there seems refuge only in the self. A parallel can be found in the previous *fin de siècle*, when the loss of faith in enlightenment rationalism and in totalizing explanations of the world ("*l'incrédulité à l'égard des métarécits*," as LYOTARD put it), led to the search for refuge in small, but authentic, personal narratives. With this end in mind, the new biographical and narrative genres have the potential to represent lived experience in social life. According to the feminist *dictum* "the personal is political," claiming the personal dimension of life, far from being a possible neo-romanticism or an "expressivist policy," may be one of the possible ways to make a difference politically. A certain disillusionment with explanations of subjectivity in terms of foreign referents, whether sociological or historical, has led to the emergence of the dynamic materiality of the subject's word as constituting his or her experiences, memory and identity. In this context, biographical-narrative research emerges as a potent tool, especially pertinent for entering into the world of identity, meanings and practical knowledge and everyday codes present in the processes of interrelation, identification and personal and cultural reconstruction (ACEVES, 1994, 2001). [5]

The biographical-narrative approach, after the crisis of positivism and the hermeneutic turn in the social sciences, has become a particular approach to investigation which demands—as we have argued (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001)—its own credibility under the broad umbrella of qualitative research. Likewise, in accord with the postmodern sensitivity to the life-world, it has been strengthened by the new attention to discourse and text in the

"narrative turn," highlighted by poststructuralist criticism. The intention is to grant the relevance of the discursive dimension of individuality, to the ways human beings live through language (as ORTEGA said, following DILTHEY), and give meaning to the life-world (HUSSERL's "Lebenswelt") through language. [6]

More than a quarter of a century ago, Clifford GEERTZ (1994) spoke of a "reconfiguration of social thought," by means of which culture and society are understood as a collection of texts to be read and interpreted. Biographical-narrative research is acquiring more relevance every day, altering the habitual ways in which we understand knowledge, bringing its own *focus*, with its own ways of using qualitative methodology. The biographical-narrative approach and its corresponding methodologies are becoming increasingly seductive. Having its own origins ("Chicago School"), the different social sciences (sociology, anthropology, psychology, education) have been using it in abundance in the past decade. Within a "hermeneutic" style of methodology, it makes it possible to holistically give meaning to and understand cognitive, affective and active dimensions. Telling ones own *lived*-experiences, and "reading" (in the sense of "interpreting") these events/actions in the light of the stories that agents narrate, has become a particular research *perspective*. Subjectivity is, also, a necessary condition of social knowledge. The interplay of subjectivities that is produced in a biographical account, based on a dialogue between oneself and the listener in search of a consensual truth, is a dialogical process, privileging the construction of understanding and meaning. Biographical-narrative research is a way of extending and prioritizing a narrative and dialogical self, with a relational and communal nature. [7]

But biographical-narrative analyses are not free of dangers and limitations. Michel FOUCAULT (1999), Norman DENZIN (1991), and Nikolas ROSE (1996) have warned that biographical-narrative methods, while allowing agents to be heard, are also devices of knowledge and power and, as such, instruments of domination through the access to knowledge about life. The desire for knowledge about life, as well as being a "technology of the self" in modern forms of confession (where one narrates the "truth" about oneself), when secular, is inscribed in the conservative cultural logic of late capitalism, which contributes to preserving the myth of a free and autonomous individual, converted into a consumer product in the *media*. Applying the entire biographical-narrative approach to personal experience, without connecting it to the underlying social and political strata, which—if we continue to be modern—strongly determine it, would lead to a "politically *naive*" vision, leaving things the way they are. [8]

Nikolas ROSE (1996) showed how, from a Foucauldian perspective, the narratives of life, biography and self-fulfillment are inscribed within the new technologies for governing the individuals of "advanced liberalism," whose thrust consists in making them responsible. This new configuration of individuality, maintaining the illusion of self-formation, promotes an ethic of personalization as a new formula for at the same time reinventing the making of oneself. Biographies, converted into objects of knowledge, become procedures for objectivizing individuals as subjects. Biographies can be instruments of individual

autonomy or of professional training, and, thus, it is necessary to explain and negotiate as much as possible the conditions of their exercise and use. [9]

In any case, beyond any Foucauldian analysis or enlightenment modernism, for better or worse, as the BECKS were able to describe very well, we find ourselves at a moment in which institutionalized individualization tries to become life itself:

"It would not be an exaggeration to state that the daily struggle to have one's own life has become the collective experience of the western world. It expresses what remains of our communal feeling [...] The ideology of the neoliberal market puts into practice atomization with all its political will [...] Living one's own life can mean that many of the concepts and formulas of the first modernity have become insufficient. The normal biography becomes, thus, an elective, reflexive biography" (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2003, pp. 69 and 73). [10]

This individualization (which cannot be assimilated to "individualism" or to enlightened autonomy) is at the base of the increase in life histories and identities in the reflexive modernity that has led to the decline of traditional institutions. From a similar position, Anthony GIDDENS (1995) has captured how the emancipatory politics of modernity have changed to "life politics," which require the self-fulfillment of individuals, and in which the self becomes a reflexive project depending on its own biography. [11]

### **3. Defining the Field Under Review**

The biographical framework—understood, first, as research that uses every type of source that provides information of a personal nature and that serves to document a life, an event or a social situation—makes intelligible the personal and hidden side of life, experience and knowledge. In it are included all kinds of approaches and means of investigation whose main source of data is obtained from biographies, personal material or oral sources. This information gives meaning to, explains or answers, vital current, past or future questions, based on the elaborations or arguments in terms of which life experiences or histories are told from the perspective of the narrator. [12]

Both the social dimension and the personal and biographical dimensions, as THOMAS and ZNANIECKI (2004) observed in the 1920's, are indissociable from the logic of discourse: the subjects' stories. The stories that people tell about their personal lives tell about what they do, what they felt, what happened to them or the consequences of a certain action, always contextually situated in relation to others, not of a solitary and impartial self. The narrative expresses the emotive dimension of experience, the complexity, relationships and singularity of each action, in contrast to the deficiencies of atomist and formalist ways of decomposing actions into discrete variables. As a form of knowledge, the story captures the richness and details of the meanings in human affairs (motivations, feelings, desires, or intentions), details that cannot be expressed in definitions, factual statements or abstract propositions, as logical-formal reasoning attempts

to do. As BRUNER (1988, p.27) says: "the objects of the narrative are the vicissitudes of human intentions." [13]

The multifaceted character of this methodology and the diverse traditions in which it is based have given rise to a terminological multiplicity. The most widely used terms and, at the same time, those most difficult to define are *biography* and *autobiography*. These are, furthermore, associated with multiple uses in the field of writing about the self: cases, stories, autobiographies, biographies, narrations, life histories, sociological autobiographies, self-stories, etc. With the appearance of the biographical method in sociology and the conceptual definitions of these terms, it is typical to distinguish between:

1. *life story or narration or life account: the narration of a life as the person lived it and/or tells it;*
2. *life history or history of life: a combination of the previous concept and the external elaborations of biographers and investigators, such as records, interviews, etc., that make it possible to validate this narration and/or history.* [14]

There are also multiple nouns and adjectives included within this platform: oral history, (auto) biography, life account, biographical narration, life histories, etc. And there are many fields in which these are used: anthropology, history, sociology, psychology, education, professional training, economics, linguistics ... For this reason one speaks of a "biographical symptom," rather than of a methodology or a final definition, following the logic of and parallel to the increase in the qualitative paradigm and interest in the particular, the human, the personal, the world of internal meanings, etc. In Spanish, as in German ("Lebensgeschichte"), "historia de vida" has both meanings. Bernabé SARABIA (1985), in a pioneering study in Spanish on life histories, has established—following DENZIN (1991)—the distinction between life histories ("autobiographies defined as lives narrated by those who have lived them, or reports produced by subjects about their own lives") and biographies ("narrations in which the subject of the narration is not its final author"). [15]

Keeping in mind the warning by CONNELLY and CLANDININ (1995, p.12), in order to place and conceptualize this better, we will differentiate among the *phenomenon* that is investigated and that has a biographical-narrative form, the *research methodology* used (qualitative and narrative research), and the *use* that is made of these materials (to promote reflection and dialogue in order to deeply understand the situation and its significance, at the same time to change and improve it). Both the phenomenon and the different methods aid in the task of biographical-narrative research. [16]

With all of this, as we have argued elsewhere (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 1998, 2001), a biographical-narrative approach tries to explore the deep meanings of life histories, rather than being limited to a methodology that gathers and analyzes data, so as to constitute a perspective that can be characterized by five basic postulates:

- *Narrative*: The perceptions of practice and practical, experiential and life knowledge are difficult to perceive and transmit in any other way.
- *Constructivist*: There is a continuous attribution of meanings to the many histories that are being reconstructed around anecdotes or episodes, depending on the explanation of the present and the current degree of development, which allows us a reconstruction/reflection/assimilation/overcoming of our own history. The past, at least in its interpretation and consequences, continues to be present in day-to-day life, influencing and helping inform an analysis with which to make decisions and face the future. At the same time this history reconstructs, interprets or refocuses itself, depending on the current focus and understanding.
- *Contextual*: Biographical narrations and the episodes they relate only make sense within the contexts in which they are told and where they are produced: social, cultural, institutional, etc.
- *Interactionist*: Meanings are acquired and interpreted depending on the context in which they take place and in continuous interaction with each other; a certain context may influence the biography, and this may have authentic meaning in its relations with other lives, contexts, situations, historical moments, epiphanies and critical moments, etc., among which the meaning of the narration itself is constructed. The sources, witnesses, actors, etc. do not precede the biography, but rather they are constructed and modified through the accounts.
- *Dynamic*: It has an important temporal component and, through the very concept of development, it is constructed and reconstructed constantly in a continuous, although not homogeneous, process. [17]

As a humanist approach to social reality (PLUMMER, 2004), this perspective dialectically combines its approximation to the subjectivity of biographical testimonies contextualized within matrices of objective relationships with the context and cohorts with which the subject is involved during his trajectory through life. In this way, personal accounts show the complexity of the life paths of subjects and of social groups—especially the primary ones (small community), beyond more formal and/or global norms and fashions. [18]

The biographical search serves to make explicit the processes of socialization, the main support for one's identity, the impacts one receives and perceives, the critical incidents in one's history, the evolution of one's demands and expectations, as well as the factors that condition one's attitude toward life and toward the future. By means of this methodology, it is possible to show the "voice" of everyday protagonists. Their life stories and experiences make public those perceptions, interests, doubts, orientations, milestones and circumstances that—from their perspective—have had a significant influence on who they are and how they have acted. [19]

In times when grand narratives are questioned, it is appropriated to speak of oneself and make use of personal accounts of experiences, of voices traditionally silenced and day-to-day protagonists. Biographical and, especially, narrative

inquiry makes it possible for profiles to be developed that link qualitative research strategies to the real actors of daily life. Biographical narration offers a conceptual and methodological framework in which to analyze essential aspects of human development and mark "its" personal lines and expectations for advancement. Sharing life, meanings and understandings dialectically through a life story allows the creation and maintenance of a discursive community. In this sense, narrative inquiry makes it possible for us to notice and represent a number of relevant dimensions of experience (feelings, resolutions, desires, etc.) that formal research leaves out. But it does not only express important dimensions of the experience lived; more radically, it also intervenes in the experience itself and configures the social construction of reality (BRUNER, 1988). [20]

At the same time, telling one's own experiences and interpreting events in light of ones personal life history is—in itself—a strongly rooted source of training and a means of projecting the future from accumulated and experienced knowledge. The dialectic of self-interpretation in the first person is a way to approach personal and social reality. [21]

Life histories are constructed by integrating all those elements from the past that the subject considers relevant for describing, understanding or representing the current situation and prospectively facing the future. As THOMAS and ZNANIECKI (2004) said, life histories "constitute the perfect class of sociological material." They present a life history of the peasant Wladeck, a polish emigrant, told extensively throughout 300 pages, from his birth to the present moment (his school and family life, first jobs and emigration to Germany and, later, to Chicago) in *The Polish Peasant*. This is an extensive narration of an entire life experience, illuminating the most important aspects. To do so, personal documents were employed. PLUMMER (2004, p.14) defines these as:

"all those documents in which a person reveals his social and personal characteristics in ways that make them accessible to the research. They would include diaries, letters, photographs, life stories and even tombstone inscriptions. Nowadays, videos and personal web sites should also be included." [22]

This conceptual and methodological framework makes it possible to take an inventory of experiences, practical knowledge and professional competencies as these are lived. At the same time it is possible to influence new analysts, who organize the account based on a global vision of the person, his social role and his professional endeavors. These agents act as a critical mirror that reflects the image so it can be rethought, reanalyzed and reconstructed. As a means of investigation, it alters the usual ways of understanding knowledge in the social sciences and understanding what is important to know. It has, therefore, provoked a certain amount of opposition, and demands for kinds of analyses and results more appropriate to other methodologies, and which this approach cannot provide. In order to try to reduce these difficulties, various studies (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001; BOLÍVAR, 2002; MARINAS & SANTAMARINA, 1993; De MIGUEL, 1996; FLICK, 2004) describe biographical-narrative methods succinctly and recommend:



- Using appropriate instruments, such as *cascades of reflexive penetration* in biographical-narrative accounts, discussion groups, histories of learning, etc.;
- using triangular modes of vertical analysis, or by case, and horizontal analysis, or searching for group, narrative and story-based regularities;
- assuring the validity of the research process by explaining, describing and arguing for each step taken and each decision made;
- using data saturation processes (aiming for a state in which new accounts do not provide anything relevant that is not already known) and key informant searches with "snowball" processes (based on initial results, broaden the sample of informants according to the data and clues that are offered) ,and not rejecting "white points" (those not well-enough explained or ignored), or alternative and discordant cases:
- presenting the results for public debate and dialectic negotiation with the informants/actors. [23]

#### 4. Origin and Development of the Biographical-narrative Methodology

The current increase in use of biographical-narrative approaches may be due to the new postmodern sensitivity that has flooded investigation in the social sciences. However, as the overview presented above shows, it has deep enough historical roots and diverse enough geographical, thematic and epistemological locations to suggest that this popularity has a solid base that extends beyond mere fashion or a particular and idiosyncratic geographical setting or topic or area of knowledge. If we closely review some of the developments in the area of social science, it is possible to observe these changes in strengths, arguments and ways of doing things. We will try to sketch a portrait of this issue which, while it will certainly be complex, hopefully will also be nonetheless clarifying. [24]

Qualitative methodology in Spain, as in the other Iberoamerican countries, has a long history (SARABIA & ZARCO, 1997; ZARCO, 1998). Narrative and biographical research have been used in diverse fields (anthropology, linguistics and literature, oral history, psychology, etc.). Although reviews have been carried out recently on biographical-narrative developments internationally<sup>1</sup>, but given the rapidly growing interest in the topic<sup>2</sup> it seems desirable to complete and update these data as they concern the Iberoamerican setting. [25]

In this regard, we pointed out earlier the special confluence and interchange between the two sides of the Atlantic. Due to the long period of dictatorship in Spain, with the resulting isolation from major theoretical movements, it was in Iberoamerica where (with Spanish exiles after the Civil War) the first developments of qualitative methodology and, specifically, biographical-narrative inquiry, took place. We would like to highlight, as SARABIA and ZARCO (1997,

1 Cf. the following studies: SWINDELLS (1995), CHAMBERLAYNE, WENGRAF and BORNAT (2000) or GOODLEY, LAWTHOM, CLOUGH and MOORE (2004).

2 As can be deduced from the broad resonance of the topic in important journals like *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, specific journals appear in this area, and there is an growing frequency of articles dedicated to this topic or research based on this approach.

pp.32-36) do in their history, the sociological work of José MEDINA ECHAVARRÍA, who carried out his work in various countries (Mexico, Colombia and Chile). At the beginning of the 1940's he published his study *Sociology: Theory and technique* (MEDINA ECHAVARRÍA, 1941), where he proposes—following the ideas of the German thought of DILTHEY, RICKERT and WEBER, extended in Spain by the Ortegian circles—a methodology specifically for the sciences of culture rather than for the natural sciences. Borrowing ideas from the Chicago School, he considers human behavior to be a symbolic activity that must be studied with an appropriate methodology, and he considers *The Polish Peasant* by THOMAS and ZNANIECKI as "the best monograph so far this century." This book, although not translated into Spanish until 2004, is one of the fundamental works for qualitative methodology and, specifically, of life history. The reference to it by MEDINA ECHAVARRÍA is noteworthy. His legacy is broad and relevant, as can be seen in a posthumous collection of his writings (MEDINA ECHAVARRÍA, 1980). [26]

An example is provided by his *life histories*, with two texts published in the 1960's. In the first place, as Miguel VALLES and Alejandro BAER (2005) have pointed out extensively in this journal, Juan Francisco MARSAL (1969) published in Buenos Aires (and a few years later in Spain) a life history about a Spanish emigrant to Argentina, exemplifying in the Argentinean case the life history of the peasant that THOMAS and ZNANIECKI (1994) included in their *opus magna* on the Poles who emigrated to Chicago. In one of the first collections about life history in Spanish, Jorge BALÁN (1974) published in Buenos Aires a monograph on *Life histories in the social sciences: theory and technique*, where he included relevant articles on the topic, among others, the work by BECKER on *Life histories in sociology*. Furthermore, in the following years he published, together with Elisabeth JELIN (BALÁN & JELIN, 1979, 1980), a second treatment of the topic called *The structure of personal biography*. From then on, the methodology increased its presence in the social sciences. Thus, in Buenos Aires, the Social Science Notebooks by FLACSO published a monograph on *Oral history and life histories*, where they include, among others, the important work by Daniel BERTAUX (1980); around the same time the Spanish journal *Papers* translated a relevant study by SZCZEPANSSKI (1978). Victor CÓRDOVA (1990) published in Caracas a notebook for circulation on life history as an alternative methodology for the social sciences. Other pioneer studies were SARABIA (1985), the important book by PUJADAS (1992) and the monographic issue of the *International Sociology Journal* (vol. 44, no.3, 1986). We can say that, in the Hispanic setting, it was the book by MARINAS and SANTAMARINA (1993) that marked the official introduction of life history. This book included some of the major essays in this field (some already included in the book edited in the Anglo-Saxon world by BERTAUX, 1981). [27]

We are aware that any selection like the above is by nature incomplete, so that we are not attempting to be exhaustive, but instead to include what we find the most interesting publications for our topic. For this purpose, we start with the various reviews and systemization efforts carried out for oral history by the journal

*History, Anthropology and Oral Sources* (ancient *History and Oral Source*<sup>3</sup>) and reviews of qualitative research in the social sciences carried out by VALLÉS and BAER (2005). There are also excellent introductory works on qualitative methodology in social research<sup>4</sup> and key anthologies for understanding the development and uses of the approach<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, and more specifically, we carried out a global review with the purpose of elaborating a bibliographical guide to investigating in the area of the social sciences from the biographical-narrative perspective (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 1998) and to look more closely at its epistemological foundation (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001; BOLÍVAR, 2002). [28]

An initial historical approximation, in the Iberoamerican context, to the origin and development of the biographical method reveals that it has had many focal points and centers of interest, and that these have changed over time. It has moved from narrative-literary considerations, from diverse ideographic and conservationist positions, to the use of voices and personal documents designed to recover the historical memory of episodes, personalities and situations of special personal and/or social relevance. At the same time, it has dealt also with the "other" history, the non-official one, the history of the common people, the minorities, the defeated, the peasants, those silenced or "without voice." [29]

With these different viewpoints, and the growing interest in the fields of marginality, acculturation and developments of personality and culture, sociology began to become interested in this topic, and the method began to gather strength. It began diversifying and specializing "in crescendo" from the so-called "*biographical symptom*" (MARINAS & SANTAMARINA, 1994) to the explosion of our times, in which the talk is of "*the reason behind the symptom*" (MARINAS, 2004). [30]

This indicator—called the "biographical symptom"—stimulated the emergence of a discourse that was previously hidden in traditional sociological research and that now is uncovered, broadening the discipline and enabling it to form a self-

3 We refer both to the studies carried out by Eugenia MEYER (1991), and to those included in the two monographs (no. 13 from 1995 and 14 from 1996) dedicated to carrying out an inventory and review of the 25 years of Oral History, and that includes specialized contributions (on Oral History) from the XVIII Congress on Historical Sciences in Montreal (1995), with very significant contributions like those of Eugenia MEYER (1995), Dora SCHVARZSTEIN (1995) and Marieta DE MORAES (1995) for the Iberoamerican setting, as well as those by Cristina BORDERÍAS (1995), for the Spanish, and other final reviews, like the one by Ángeles EGIDO (2001).

4 Cf. some general reviews carried out in the field of qualitative research which include among their chapters reviews and methodological research proposals along biographical-narrative lines (GARCÍA-FERRANDO, IBÁÑEZ & ALVIRA, 1986; DELGADO & GUTIÉRREZ, 1994; OLABUENAGA, 1996; VALLES, 1997; SARABIA & ZARCO, 1997), as well as specific studies from this perspective (PUJADAS, 1992; ACEVES, 1992; De MIGUEL, 1996; LÓPEZ-BARAJAS, 1998) and reviews of research in this line applied to specific fields—education in this case—like the one by GONZÁLEZ MONTEAGUDO (1996).

5 Cf. the anthologies emerging at the beginning of the 1990's (BALAN, 1974; ACEVES, 1993; MARINAS & SANTAMARINA, 1993), such as monographs like the one dedicated by the *International Journal of Sociology* (no. 44, 1986), that include ideas, evolutions and key texts at this time by BERTAUX, DENZIN, FERRAROTI, THOMPSON, ROBON or MORIN, contemporary with the 197 page monograph that the journal *Sociology* dedicated to "Biography and autobiography in sociology" (no. 27, 1, 1993).

awareness of society. In the current context, general importance is given (outside of social research) to the meaning of subjects' accounts, to histories that include vital experiences, and to "everyone's right to an autobiography." Life histories and biographies seem to have a new importance at this time, precisely because there is a profound review of our social knowledge (not just sociological), due to a set of phenomena breaking cultural and ideological codes and conventional reference systems. [31]

All of this is apparent in diverse social groups and scenarios, paying special attention to life histories that are peculiar and exemplary. It is, therefore, a symptom that occurs as much in the field of theories about society as in the processes of our culture themselves. [32]

Thus, there is a setting where, from different focal points and with different influences and trajectories (some local and some clearly international), a change has begun in the parameters of social research that stems mainly from oral history, from political vindication of the defeated and important minorities (women, farmers, and common people), and the increase in sociological research of a qualitative nature. In parallel there are arguments, principles and procedures for action that give this change its methodological and epistemological body and structure. It, therefore, manages to become an approach with its own identity—going from being a fashion or symptom to a new kind of rationality—one that can be used beyond its original areas or fields of study. [33]

But as with all social phenomena, this change is not spontaneous or unilateral. It arises as a process, diluted in time—although with large, clearly identifiable milestones—with diverse points of interest and specific contexts of application that can be defined in terms of the following categories: 1) by moments or focal points; 2) by the countries in which it develops; 3) by methodological developments within the biographical-narrative approach. The review and inventory below follows the emergence and development of these different poles of interest in the Iberoamerican setting, leading to its establishment today as an accepted *approach*, with its own ways of using qualitative methodology to work with and on the accounts of life and experience and (auto)biographical sources [34]

#### **4.1 Main moments and focal points**

To understand the process of establishing the biographical-narrative approach in the Iberoamerican context, it is necessary to point out at the start that it basically follows—although at its own speed, with its specific centers of attention and circumstances—the evolution of the approach at an international level. Basically, one can refer to:

1. The "dawning," as different and unrelated fields of study start to consider the "other" history and the "other" more personal and subjective views of social reality.
2. The development of the "biographical-narrative symptom," when, from different focal points and in different areas of study, the need deepened to delve into the human and personal side of meanings and social events. There is no common starting point, not even similar methodological uses, but rather a common sensitivity that begins to operate. A new scene must be set up, so that a network begins to form, looking for approaches and methodologies in like-minded fields that might be useful and, little by little, progressively joining spaces, visions, perspectives, methodological uses, lines of research and development, etc. until it becomes institutionalized. The increase in qualitative investigation in general is a parallel process, and this new approach finds shelter under its broad umbrella. But, given the level of consistency and coincidence in the main sources of documentation (biographical accounts, experiences, autobiographies and making sense of the world from the meaning itself of lives described) and its emergent popularity—after years of darkness and quantitative academics—it is identified with a symptom that ends up exploding into a new biographical-narrative vision with its own entity.
3. *The "biographical rationalization,"* once accepted in the scientific community, with increasing use in projects and studies, a process begins that goes beyond fashion or banal and trivial uses<sup>6</sup>. New challenges are taken up and there begins to be a need to make sure that the approach has epistemological seriousness and consistency and methodological credibility. [35]

#### 4.1.1 *The "dawning": The conservationist anthropologist perspective*

In the 1920's, some anthropologists saw the need to document minority or exotic cultures. In doing so, they began to establish how customs and institutions are experienced from inside, in order to rescue the history of indigenous peoples, of farming communities or the tales of the Mexican Revolution<sup>7</sup>, generally gathered by institutions and non-academic agents. Owing to its proximity with journalism and historiography in the United States, oral history in Latin America did not suffer from discrimination. In fact, influenced by it, political biographies and testimonials were usually extensively collected from figures in the directive and trade union elite and from other historical actors. [36]

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6 It is important not to forget the warning given by José R. LLOBERA (1990) on the desecration of field research and thick description as an end in itself with little explanatory or theoretical value, which occurs sometimes with the reiteration or recompilation of oral accounts of marginal, peasant, defeated or professional individuals in our area.

7 Well-documented in almost all the Latin American countries is the attempt to rescue testimonies of those "without history" (MEYER, 1995), that have been seen represented in "national contests" and in many archives and institutions dedicated to this purpose. Cf. The sound archive of the INAH that collected many interviews with the leaders of the Mexican Revolution, and later would evolve into the Archive of the Word, in addition to the leaders, also included voices of witnesses and other contextualized elements.

#### 4.1.2 *The development of the "biographical-narrative symptom." Rescuing communitary identities*

During the previous phase in the Iberoamerican setting, often ahead of other key countries in many aspects, the work was carried out by non-academic agents—true social researchers—which means it did not have much methodological or epistemological impact. Furthermore, many of these countries passed through stages of restricted freedom, which slowed down and interfered with the new perspective, compared with what was happening on the international scene. However, it later acquired such force, and there was such a need to bring to light repressed personal and daily reality, that these countries became especially open to external contributions, which were accepted, personalized and integrated with great speed, acquiring a rank and a nature of their own. [37]

Meanwhile, between Europe and North America a movement emerged that was led by THOMAS and ZANIECKI, and BERTAUX—among others—who attempted to rescue communitary identities which had begun to be forgotten or lost in the new societies that were being built. We could highlight the entire tradition in Polish and French sociology of collecting autobiographies from specific social sectors, generally workers, immigrants or peasants, as indicators of the Polish social reality or of a trade that was disappearing, to show their personal experiences, their life trajectories, their difficulties, etc. Such researchers based their efforts on the idea that the impact of change and social organization can only be understood through the lives of the individuals affected by them, in a dialectic play of cause and effect between the actors and their life histories. [38]

This movement also had repercussions in the Iberoamerican scene, with studies like the one about a Spanish emigrant to Argentina (MARSAL 1969). This study was the starting point for an entire school of study (Barcelona School), which, in addition, has come together within the platform of qualitative research and the use of life histories methodology in sociology<sup>8</sup>. But one must not forget the early contributions that offered paths to follow, such as the study published by SZCZEPANSKI in the journal *Papers* (1978). [39]

Although these contributions and studies were more influential in some schools than in others, beyond the divisions by areas (oral history, anthropology or sociology) it seems appropriate to focus on three centers of interest that generated projects, studies and experiences: [40]

##### 4.1.2.1 Cultural and psychoanalytical portrait of social groups and/or complex societies

American anthropology at this time used biographies primarily to show how an individual reacts to the cultural norms imposed by his or her society rather than

8 In addition to MARSAL, there has been a long tradition of research on life histories of emigrants. To point out one of the latest, María Jesús CRIADO (2001), in her book *La línea quebrada: historias de vida de migrantes*, includes in the second part ("Crónicas desde la emigración") a group of life histories of migrants in Spain, and dedicates the third to "Analysis and interpretation."

merely to reconstruct an individual's experience chronologically. This approach established, for the first time, how people live within their customs and institutions. [41]

This approach turned, in some cases, toward the recovery of psychoanalytical interpretations to study the daily reproduction of the population (MARTINEZ-SALGADO, 1996) and to understanding what happens, who one is and why people do what they do. Along these lines, the contributions by IBÁÑEZ (1991) and BALÁN (1974; BALAN & JELIN, 1979, 1980) stand out as authentic precursors of the approach in our area of study. However the former, throughout his work, tends more toward delving into and working with discussion groups. [42]

From this perspective a "cultural portrait" will be made of a person through their subjective accounts, to reflect their conflicts, values, experiences and daily activity (POZAS, 1962; ACEVES, 2001). One interesting variation is to use various "crossed testimonies" by key informants and "parallel narrations" of those involved, which gives the account a "polyphonic structure" (LEWIS 1961). Without doubt, this is another of the basic pillars on which the approach is built<sup>9</sup>. [43]

There is now an interest in the past, the subjective and the cultural that is different from the traditional transmission of knowledge, with tradition coexisting with modernity, in a search for vestiges that had previously been lost. From here comes the interest raised in the subject, the individual, their daily life, and their efforts to interpret the social experiences, the subject in their activities, the way they act in their particular social conditions<sup>10</sup>. [44]

The thematic orientations that began to open up were: social classes and professions, artisans, teachers, workers and other professional groups, migrations, youth and the history of families. All of this provoked an initial resurgence and vitalization of the biographical approach and method. In this topic it would be appropriate to include the contribution by MASSOLO (1992) on the participation of women in urban movements. Exploring the relationships among and the limits between experience and narration, autobiographical narratives are placed in the terrain of collective memory, ethical and aesthetic motivations and socialization processes. This line of research created a means to delve more deeply into the interactions and links existing between the history of life and social movements (SALTALAMACCHIA et al., 1984), while insisting on the problem of representativity (SALTALAMACCHIA, 1987, 1992). There was also a novel entrance into the educational field by NÓVOA (1992), looking at the lives of teachers, and the tradition of relevant authors who highlight the importance of school ethnography and anthropological knowledge for teachers<sup>11</sup>. [45]

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9 Using this perspective of polyphonic accounts—applying and integrating vertical analyses (of cases) and horizontal analyses (of group, institution) (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001)—our research group went on to describe the institutional development process of an educational center (DOMINGO & BOLÍVAR, 1996) and the process of professional development and identity of teachers and secondary education teachers (BOLÍVAR et al., 1999).

10 Good examples of this can be found in LINDÓN (1999b), BORDERÍAS (1991), FOLGUERA (1987) or PÉREZ-FUENTES (1993).

#### 4.1.2.2 Recovering historical memory

Even within the "militant" oral history focus, after the restoration of democracy in several countries that had suffered under dictators, there emerged an important movement to restore the truth or collect and show the "other" history (the one silenced and hidden). [46]

The biographical narratives that resulted have great importance, although with a clearly political objective of reassessing and recovering historical memory as a denouncement and as a standard for reestablishing identity and worth, and maintaining an attitude or posture of dignity. They also stem from different focal points of interest and even from unconnected places, although they have in common that they are situations where people have been stripped of liberty and human rights. As SCHWARRZSTEIN (1995, p.45) points out, in Latin America this approach has a special significance, as it is linked to these memory recovery processes, based on a political commitment, and closely linked to social movements; in almost all the countries people had lived traumatic experiences that could not be ignored. [47]

In this way, another symptom of the effervescence of the biographical method was a reaction to traumatic experiences. The victims had the need to talk about their lives so as not to lose their identity. At the same time they were recovering a biographical memory of events that would otherwise remain unknown and unpunished<sup>12</sup>. On this point, keeping to our context, in addition to the classic study by FRASER (1979) we count on numerous works (literary, journalistic, and from sociological research) that recover accounts of survivors, "those underground"<sup>13</sup>, women, and exiles in the Spanish Civil War<sup>14</sup>. Isabel ALLENDE gives a splendid account, in a personal manner, of the coup d'etat by General Pinochet in Chile. She also tells her family history up to that point, so as not to lose the memories or identity<sup>15</sup>. [48]

Also, in answer to a very specific Spanish question, the followers of MARSAL initiated a strong line of investigation about nationalism, with studies like those by HERNÁNDEZ and MERCADÉ (1986). [49]

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11 We would highlight in this respect the translation of VELASCO, GARCÍA CASTAÑO and DÍAZ DE RADA (1993).

12 There are interesting examples of memories of Auschwitz and the processes of concentration camps in Vietnam; and it is also common in all the Iberoamerican countries to see the emergence of these "other histories" after the return to democracy after military and dictatorial regimes.

13 Persons who had to remain hidden and missing in order to avoid suffering repercussions. Examples of this are the journalistic research published in the book by TORBADO and LEGUINECHE (1978) and the classic by FRASER (1972).

14 Some samples could be found—among others—in the studies by FRASER, Ronald (1987) or CATALÀ (1984) or in the *Coloquio Internacional*, celebrated in the University of Salamanca on *the Spanish in France between 1936 and 1946*.

15 Isabel ALLENDE, in her book, *The House of the Spirits*, relates her family chronicle set in the whirlwind of political and economic changes that occurred in Chile around the coup d'etat; she returns to the topic in *Paula*, by dedicating to her daughter a remembrance of her family and the exceptional and difficult circumstances they had to live under and be the protagonists of.



#### 4.1.2.3 Studies on discrimination

From the period between the wars to the 1960's, research focused on social change and acculturation. It dealt especially with discrimination, minorities, etc., with a focus on the individual dimension or experience. At this time of increase in positivism and quantification, the biographical methodology was restricted to groups that were difficult to access and impossible to quantify, precisely because they were on the margins. There was a movement from an exterior or distant exoticism (the testimonialism of the first documentary anthropologists) to an interior or interactionist one, coming from the psychoanalytic and anthropological school for the study of culture and personality and from the sociological approach of the Chicago School. [50]

In fact, the inaugural work of this method, not translated into Spanish until recently (THOMAS & ZNANIECKI, 2004), concerned Polish immigrant peasants in America (which is an important reference for this second moment<sup>16</sup>), and was a study of the down and out in Chicago. Sociologists began to worry about the discrimination and social conflicts that occurred in the city and in the immigrant populations, but not only as macrosocial processes. Instead they examined how this discrimination was experienced from within, on the basis of personal biographies from the immigrant populations. This alternative and democratic history and sociology gave a voice to the defeated and dominated (peasants, workers, women, and all types of minorities) (JIMÉNEZ, 1978). [51]

An important place, due to the significance of his work, is occupied by Oscar LEWIS, specifically his first great studies (*Anthropology of Poverty*, followed by *The Children of Sanchez*, and *Pedro Martínez*), where he brought to light the experience of discrimination and poverty. An object of debate (as a North American and colonialist anthropologist considered to have attacked the Mexican vision), he nevertheless showed the possibilities of the biographical method, in particular through his approach of gathering many autobiographies and making a polyphonic synthesis by crossing life stories. This technique allowed him to make the biographical dimension of the families emerge as a unit of analysis. While it is true that the social and structural contexts that determined these biographical conditions did not appear sufficiently, this author surpassed the merely individual account by approaching the social through the individual. [52]

Later, there was another more reclamatory and emancipatory movement, which dealt with discrimination with a proposal for making the "other society" emerge. An attempt was made to understand the deeper reasons for it, the structural violence endured, and the attempted solutions experienced and lived by the protagonists themselves. In this movement we can highlight the works by GAMELLA (1990) on the world of drugs, by NEGRE (1988) on prostitution, by MORALES (1993) on the African immigration in Madrid, and those by VALENZUELA (1988) and REGUILLO (1991) on juvenile sub-cultures. [53]

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16 Although in spite of their importance and significance at an international level, they were not translated into Spanish until very recently, when the perspective was already established and the methodology validated.

#### 4.1.3 The "biographical rationalization": The generalization of biographical-narrative style research

An important qualitative leap occurred in ending an identification of the biographical-narrative approach with the focus on discrimination and subcultures or those without a voice (and accepting these uses as especially pertinent) to a dedication to the everyday, the citizen on the street and topics of daily life. Thus, it can be said that there was an institutionalization of this area of study as a space for interdisciplinary debate and as a specific field in qualitative methodology. Some stages—undoubtedly important—had already been overcome and there was a clear decision to go beyond accusations and airing what was forgotten and excluded, to undertake—along the lines of the complexity paradigm (MORÍN, 1994)—a new global understanding which would be based on the specific and profound understanding of small, plural and multiethnic histories. These histories are themselves complex, and they are interrelated in a complex mixed texture (both social and cultural). [54]

The acceptance and generalization of biographical-narrative research as a methodological approach with its own existence—and, in parallel, the qualitative symptom described by CISNEROS (2000)—, means that more and more studies use it and more and more new articles appear that prove the importance and/or usefulness of this perspective. This acceptance prepares the way for its integration into specific knowledge areas, such as in the case of education<sup>17</sup>, and even the area of medical sciences<sup>18</sup>. [55]

Nowadays, qualitative methodology in the social sciences has been definitively consolidated. This has also occurred with biographical-narrative methodology. And there is a clear tendency toward systematization and specialization in these types of investigation, with a growing *corpus* of research—from this perspective—that is taking root and becoming increasingly more robust with new methodological contributions, perspectives and devices. With all this, the doubts of academics and the inferiority complex of the approach itself are beginning to be overcome. One can begin to observe new challenges for rationalization, and we see a new phase where this approach will be epistemologically and methodologically established.<sup>19</sup> [56]

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17 We highlight in this regard some reviews (GONZÁLEZ MONTEAGUDO, 1996; ESCOLANO & HERNÁNDEZ, 2002; NOVOA & FIGER, 1988; BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001) and the appearance of publications focused on the biographies of teachers and the interest in their particular voices that spoke about their daily lives, their experience and inexperience, their work in multicultural contexts or the value of their lives in their professional development (ACHILLI, 1996; ALLIAUD, 2004; RIVAS & SEPÚLVEDA, 2000; SÁNCHEZ-ENCISO, 2003).

18 It is important in this symptom of generalization to include, as an example, that the journal *Asclepio: Journal of the History of Medicine and Science*, includes in volume 57(1), 2005 various articles dedicated to the biographical method in social research: potential and limitations of oral sources and personal documents; the biography, between its exemplary value and lived experience, or the biography as an object of research in the university setting: reflections on a return.

19 To this end we direct the review we undertake in this article, as well as the cited study by BOLÍVAR (2002).

## 4.2 Countries where the biographical-narrative approach develops

In agreement with the panorama described by Dora SCHWARZSTEIN (1995) and Eugenia MEYER (1991, 1995), first it must be pointed out that there has been a fairly uneven development of the biographical-narrative approach, ranging from zones with a broad tradition to countries in which this approach is hardly used; furthermore, the uses and ends are also different from one case to another. With the documentation we have evaluated in this examination of the field, reviewing the oral history in America, the following main centers of development seem to stand out, but they are not described in chronological order or according to interest: [57]

Mexico and Argentina could be seen, to a certain extent, as the precursors for studies and systematizations of this approach. In the former, in addition to the studies by Oscar LEWIS (1959, 1961, 1964)<sup>20</sup>, Jorge ACEVES (1992, 1993), from the Center for Investigation and Superior Studies in Anthropology (Ciesas), introduced in his publication on oral history some of the accredited international investigators (Paul THOMPSON, Daniel BERTAUX, Alessandro PORTELLI, etc.). Likewise, Jorge BALÁN (1974), years earlier in Argentina, introduced in his collection of life histories some of the most accredited voices (Howard BECKER, Juan F. MARSAL, etc.) in the social sciences. Both countries are spotlights that have illuminated new forms for the entire Iberoamerican world. Their publishing potential makes itself felt, as they project their own points of view and contributions or translate works of great interest that would have been difficult to find in Spain at certain times in history. [58]

Mexico has experience in the use of oral history as an important part of research in the social sciences. Its permeability toward tendencies and contributions coming from North America (especially from the Chicago School), the arrival of other European influences, and its particular idiosyncrasies have produced the development of an ethnographic anthropology focused on the world of the suburbs and poverty—the case of LEWIS—more than significant contributions from sociology and qualitative research<sup>21</sup> (LINDÓN, 1999; GALINDO, 1994), or the important qualitative leap from a model of creating archives for the recovery of oral memory to true research projects. In this regard, the role played by Jorge ACEVES (1992, 1993, 1994, 1996) together with other investigators, is fundamental in the use of oral history. Also important are the new approaches integrating other disciplines, not limited to collecting voices, but instead triangulating with other sources that provide a genealogy of the context. Oral history, according to Jorge ACEVES (1996, p.18): "is interested in the social actions and events where institutions and individuals intervene in certain economic, political and symbolic-cultural processes. It is interested in producing knowledge and not only being a channel for the oral exposition of testimonies." [59]

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20 As an example, we would point out that internationally recognized figures in this area of study—such as Franco FERRAROTTI or Jorge ACEVES—dedicate some of their studies to it to highlight its scientific contribution, and that the book dedicated to the Sánchez has been translated into several languages.

21 Which offers a brief but interesting overview of the work of CISNEROS (2000).

The second country, Argentina, has also experienced a special development of oral history<sup>22</sup>, influenced by the North American oral history styles of the moment, although without their degree of financing. One example of this would be the creation of the Oral History Archive of the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires, containing accounts by union leaders and about Peronism. This archive has been greatly strengthened since the time of the restoration of democracy and was a key focus of the "militant" winds that circulated through Iberoamerica and the peninsula in the 1980's (SAUTU , 1999). [60]

But what gives Argentina its special relevance is its breadth and traditional tendency toward the study of the interior world and psychoanalysis, due to the influence of the French school led by the journal *Annales*, noted for its projects and writings (SCHWARZSTEIN, 1991). The study by BALÁN published in 1974 on *Life histories in social sciences* had an international impact and signified a re-evaluation of autobiographical accounts and other life histories beyond the influences coming from the North. Thus, it included many life histories from different disciplines and regions that reoriented this type of stud toward basic social processes of daily life and the very constitution of identity. [61]

While in other places emphasis was placed on small peasants (Mexico or Costa Rica) or on immigrants (Argentina or Uruguay), in Chile there was also interest in topics such as worker militancy and workers who arrived in the city and fought to find their place<sup>23</sup>. In this work—as in the previous case—the organizational ability of the popular sectors was highlighted, as well as the interest in everyday situations. [62]

Since 1994 Brazil has had a strong Brazilian Association of Oral History ([Associação Brasileira de História Oral, ABHO](#)), integrated into the *International Oral History Association*<sup>24</sup>, which brings together groups and individual researchers in history, the social sciences, anthropology and education. Since 1998, in addition to an electronic Bulletin, it has edited a journal (*História Oral*) in Portuguese and English, with Brazilian and international works on orality from an interdisciplinary point of view. As well as National Congresses and Regional Meetings, it has organized other international encounters, like the 10th

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22 Although in the Argentinean case, as argued by Dora SCHWARRZSTEIN (1995, p.42), there are more publications in Argentina of articles developed—in many cases—outside the country, specifically in Mexico. There are local initiatives that are completely guaranteed, among which one could highlight the journal *Recovered Voices (Oral History Journal)*, edited by the Historical Institute of the city of Buenos Aires; and another important effort by the Historical Institute to organize jointly with the Oral History Program of the School of Philosophy and Letters (UBA), the biannual *National Encounters on Oral History*. In this case not only did researchers from Argentina participate with their production, but major international references in oral history also presented conferences.

23 Cf. the experience of the government of Unidad Popular (1971-73) and the later repression by the dictatorship of Pinochet has generated many investigations, doctoral theses, memories and essays that draw on testimonies and oral sources of documentation. The social ruptures produced by the dictatorships in the Iberoamerican countries have motivated a broad effort to recover memory.

24 The [International Oral History Association](#) is a worldwide network of academics, researchers and professionals interested in oral history. It edits the journal *Words and Silences*, and it organizes international conferences.

International Congress of Oral History (Rio de Janeiro, 1998). As MORAES (1995) says, from his point of view this is the fruit of an academic tradition that gave rise to the development and institutionalization of this field of study—with the support of academics and the creation of institutes, archives, associations or meetings—and has had an effect on the entire Iberoamerican context (DE MORAES & AMADO, 1996). [63]

In Venezuela, CORDOVA (1990) has made an attempt to systematize the biographical-narrative approach to open it up to the social sciences in general. In Bolivia there was a very interesting situation around the end of the 1970's and beginning of the 1980's. Anthropologists, historians, sociologists and linguists joined together using in-depth biographical interviews to collect the accounts, traditions, culture and language of indigenous communities. Without doubt, this was an important step in the establishment of the approach. [64]

In *the Andes* there is a long-standing tradition of oral history, and there are myths and traditions recalled in biographies that explain the basic conceptions of the peasants. For this reason, in Bolivia biographical research is currently used as a source of documentation to understand social events and predict behaviors in the population in reaction to actions such as farm worker reforms, etc. They have gone from an oral history that gathers autobiographical narratives to more abstract goals, taking on specific well-defined topics for which oral sources and biographical-narratives can provide important information. In Peru, Rosa TRONCOSO has carried out a research study with written sources and interviews (narrative and video recordings) on the Peruvian Tarapaqueno Indians (2002). Furthermore, there was a multidisciplinary space for learning, investigation and diffusion of oral history in the form of an Oral History Group (GHOPUCP). In Colombia, the book edited in two volumes by LULLE, VARGAS and ZAMUDIO (1998) included the 24 papers, plus the work by CONINCK and GODARD, that were presented at the Seminar "The Uses of Life History in the Social Sciences," organized by the Research Center on Social Dynamics (CIDS) of the External University of Colombia (March 1992). The book is a good expression of the diversity of approaches and experiences used in the biographical method in Latin America. [65]

Other Iberoamerican countries have had their own development of narrative and oral history. Thus, in Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador oral histories and biographies have a clear relationship to the literacy campaigns undertaken in these countries, which show a clear relationship to the proposals stemming from the pedagogy of FREIRE (Brazil) and the new perspective on the education of adults/teachers developed in France by DOMINICÉ, JOSSO, JOBERT and PINEAU, in Portugal by NÓVOA and CANÁRIO, and in Spain by FLECHA. In Costa Rica, however, the biographical-narrative approach arises from a national contest to recover peasant autobiographies that serves as a basis for rewriting the history of the country from pre-Columbian times. But the most noteworthy aspect is the fluid involvement of the university in these processes. [66]

On the Iberian Peninsula, Spain has had a tradition of (auto)biographical study, although of a more historical and literary style, rather than purely sociological. The Spanish philosopher ORTEGA y GASSET (1947, pp.40-41), who spread the ideas of DILTHEY, defending historical reason, pointed out—in his essay *History of the System*—that

"in contrast to pure physical-mathematical reasoning, there is, then, a narrative reasoning. To understand something human, personal or collective, it is necessary to tell a story. [...] Life experiences make the future of man narrower. If we don't know what is going to be, we know what is not going to be. Life is lived with the past in view. In short, *man does not have a nature, but he instead has a history.*" [67]

In fact, DILTHEY, at the beginning of the last century, contributed decisively to giving the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) their own epistemological status, locating the personal relationships lived by each person as the key to hermeneutic interpretation. These lived experiences (*Erfahrungen*, which ORTEGA y GASSET translated as "personal experiences") are the basis for understanding (*verstehen*) human action. The continuation of this methodology, for the study of generations, can be seen in the work of the Ortegian disciple Julián MARÍAS (1949) *The historical method of the generations*. Years later, with a greater opening to what was happening in the world, the traditional German influence was replaced by North American sociology. [68]

In spite of this, the historical events related to the Civil War and the dictatorship led Spain to fall behind as far as oral history was concerned. With the arrival of democracy and the translation of many relevant works on theory and research in the social sciences, there was a rapid growth sociology and in field investigation methods. Instruments, perspectives and research approaches were systematized and endowed with a corpus of content and technique that strengthened the previous contributions. All of this crystallized later in this same setting in a explosion of the biographical-narrative approach. [69]

However, up until 1975, as VILANOVA (1995) has stated, oral history in Spain, in spite of having an early start, was the work of isolated researchers. It is important to highlight the work undertaken since then by the Catalan school, inherited from MARSAL. There were interesting incursions and developments in oral history and all its applications so that daily social reality, silenced, hidden or marginal<sup>25</sup>, could be discovered by investigators like GAMELLA, MAESTRE, MERCADÉ and NEGRE. And this sensitivity began to extend slowly throughout the whole country in the mid-1980's, having more and more influence in the scientific community in the social sciences (BORDERÍAS, 1995). [70]

With this and with the local development of qualitative methodology in sociology<sup>26</sup>, which is described by SARABIA and ZARCO (1997), instruments, perspectives and

25 Recall at this point all the important references rescued on histories about discrimination, drugs, women, or on episodes and personalities of the Spanish Civil War, mentioned earlier.

26 Led by the hermeneutic turn in the social sciences and the important contributions of distinguished sociologists like IBÁÑEZ, GARCÍA-FERRANDO, ALVIRA, ALONSO, etc.

research approaches were systematized and endowed with a corpus of content, areas of study and techniques that strengthened previous contributions. This confluence of flows of knowledge, the integration of perspectives, and methodological approaches resulting from interdisciplinary activity later crystallized in this same setting into the current appearance of the approach, which is described in the studies by Jesús DE MIGUEL (1996), BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO and FERNÁNDEZ (2001), BOLÍVAR (2002), MARINAS (2004), etc. [71]

In *Portugal* the professor Antonio NÓVOA (1992), from the University of Lisbon, introduced the French line, oriented toward training teachers and professional development. Due to his proximity to the Anglo-Saxon world and, at the same time, to the French, he was able to draw together these two contributions. In this case, a primary role was played by the anthology of texts by NÓVOA and FINGER (1988), which included the entire French tradition along these lines and its development in the area of teacher training<sup>27</sup>. In addition, new historical approaches were developed based on oral and narrative reconstruction<sup>28</sup>. [72]

#### **4.3 Methodological development within the biographical-narrative approach**

The biographical-narrative approach is based on an interest in the study of personal documents and the recognition of emergent methods for this. From the tradition that began with the Chicago School in the 1920's, after the crisis of functionalism and positivism, it adopts a reflexive orientation and a qualitative methodology, with special incidence in the biographical orientation. Among the most noteworthy methodological contributions, those of CÓRDOVA (1990), ACEVES (1992, 1996), MARINAS and SANTAMARINA (1993), PUJADAS (1992) or DE MIGUEL (1996), BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO and FERNÁNDEZ (2001) stand out. These studies include contributions ranging from theoretical, methodological and technical aspects to inventories of oral history and field guides for collecting testimonies. At the same time, they face—on the one hand—the challenge of overcoming the *banality* criticized by ALONSO (1998) and—on the other—the *rationality and scientificity* of the approach (MARINAS, 2004). [73]

Not all of the studies and authors under the umbrella of the biographical-narrative make the same methodological choices. The biographical approach remains the same, but the designs and instruments for collecting and analyzing evidence are quite varied. Every problem under study calls for particular methodological approaches and presuppositions, until one arrives at a more holistic vision of the field today, as one capable of addressing multiple problems and approaches. [74]

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27 Some proposals inherited from this proposal could be those by Antonio BOLÍVAR (1995), José María PUIG (1995), as they proposed the use of autobiographical exercises as an activity for constructing moral identity, or the analyses and proposals of GIL CANTERO (1999).

28 Cf. the studies by Antonio NOVOA (2003) or Agustín ESCOLANO (2000) on history of education.

#### *4.3.1 Contributions and methodological developments based in oral history*

In the first place studies were limited to gathering data, histories and voices from a documentalist perspective, inherited from the journalistic tradition in the United States. The majority of these studies were more a simple collection of hours and hours of taping, without analysis or systematization, than true bases of documentation with a scientific corpus and structure. However, these contributions established some bases for the method: the personal involvement of the researchers in gathering the information and constructing the narration has a specific purpose (approach). They worry about contextualizing the accounts; their constructions are more demonstrations of how an individual reacts to certain cultural norms than chronological reconstructions of personal histories. [75]

Having begun to use oral histories, biographical accounts and this type of material on the basis of democratic and egalitarian principles, giving a voice to the "true" protagonists, the role of the researcher became diluted toward that of a mere gatherer of—in his judgment—interesting and significant testimonies. He stuck to a mere transcription of the interview, so as not to alter it with interpretations that did not come from the narrator him/herself<sup>29</sup>. In spite of this, such studies offer the innovation of turning the focus on "subjective and illiterate" histories. As a consequence, the approach became more disciplined and scientific. [76]

An anthropological and linguistic-narrative turn occurred in the field of history, with the claims to its narrative character, in order to understand the proper history from below, giving voice to those who lived the events. This tendency gave a definite push to oral history and, consequently, to interest in personal views of community events, and this served as a basis for later developments (thematic and methodological) that contributed to strengthening the approach. [77]

At first, the biographical method was limited to and associated with specific areas of study that are generally less accessible with other methods (drugs, age, women, homosexuality, war experiences, prostitution, etc.) and for which this perspective offered another view with greater potential and reality. Later, with the growth of oral history<sup>30</sup>, the methodological contributions became more consistent and showed more awareness of working in a common framework (FRASER, 1990). As JOUTARD (1996) claims, taking stock of a quarter century of methodological reflection and studies in the area of oral history, what stands out is its strength and the influence it had on social science research from 1975 onward. [78]

Rescuing the quotidian, the particular and the personal from oblivion in the great written histories had a great impact. This movement took the form both of compilations of thematic essays and studies of personal and marginal

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29 This question reaches the present day, as denounced by BOLÍVAR (2002), in studies that avoid making interpretations beyond the pure account itself (BOURDIEU, 1999).

30 Based on the development of the round table on "Oral history: a new methodology for historical research" developed in the XIV International Congress of Historical Sciences in San Francisco, and that would give rise to the first international colloquium on oral history in Bologna.



perspectives previously unheard (social discrimination, the world of women or immigrants, civil war experiences, etc.) and of methodological developments capable of providing this line of work with strong technical and epistemological foundations. The material published in the journal *Anthropology, History and Oral Sources*<sup>31</sup>, together with what was produced for the many international forums, congresses and meetings and the development of various projects— promoted by VILANOVA, director of the journal *History and Oral Source*—and the studies by MARINAS and SANTAMARINA (1993, 1994), taken together signify a definitive impulse in opening up the field. New challenges were undertaken, such as developing new lines of work and methodological approaches, carefully examining the validity and credibility of the information analyzed, and integrating the necessary systematization and scientific rigor into this type of qualitative inquiry (BERTAUX, 1988). [79]

The studies by LEWIS and other authors of the so-called *cultural portrait* have provided key elements for facing new challenges in this field: transcending the individualism and testimonialism, and moving toward a more replicable method, with a strong theoretical component and the possibility of venturing into generalization based on the subjectivities of the different individualities that make up a social "group." At the same time, these studies called into question the relevance of using a method based only on the philosophy of *letting the social actors speak*. [80]

#### 4.3.2 Contributions and methodological developments based on the analysis of personal documents and testimonies in qualitative inquiry

Although, at first, analyses of personal documents and testimonies were usually studies that were not very strong, methodologically speaking, from our perspective today, for their time they had great importance and methodological and thematic impact. Authors like SARABIA (1985, 1986, 1988) showed the importance of personal documents for documenting and analyzing a life. The increase in studies based on personal documents (PLUMMER, 1989) and personal or professional diaries was noteworthy. The proposal by ZABALZA (1988), in the mid-1980's, to use class journals as documents for qualitatively studying practical professional dilemmas was, in this sense, a point of reference in the world of education. [81]

A great contribution in this line of study involved integrating the foundation and development of social research in the field of in-depth interviews and, especially, the methodology of discussion groups, with the personal, particular and biographical setting. Contributions by relevant authors and from manuals synthesizing ethnographic and qualitative research (GARCÍA-FERRANDO, IBÁÑEZ & ALVIRA, 1986; DELGADO & GUTIÉRREZ, 1994; RUIZ OLABUENAGA, 1996; VALLES, 1997; GALINDO, 1998) became necessary at

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31 It is the second era of *History and Oral Source*. It was founded in 1989 for the purpose of filling the void between the history journals dedicated to contemporary times and the oral sources. It publishes relevant studies from the prestigious *Oral History*, and the *International Journal of Oral History*.

this time. Without doubt, these contributions established a solid basis for the way we view biographical interviews and discussion groups today. [82]

These important authors and institutions of social research—driven by the need to open themselves methodologically to new and more pluralistic approaches (LATIESA, 1991)—showed an increasing interest in biographical and socio-historical study. The muteness of those investigated started to be overcome and they were allowed to speak about their concerns, their meanings and their experiences, rather than following the plans and concepts of the researcher. With this cognitive variety, contradictions and new perspectives emerged that enriched the understanding of social reality by including other more subjective, personal and experience-based points of view. [83]

In the past two decades—as witnessed by this journal (*FQS*)—there has been an increase in interest in applying interpretive methodologies and technological assistance to qualitative research, called by some "the qualitative revolution." This tendency, without doubt, has indirectly provided epistemological and methodological strength to the biographical-narrative approach<sup>32</sup>. This process has been especially vigorous in Spain, but also in Mexico and the rest of Iberoamerica, as described in the study by CISNEROS (2000, 2005). Many of the instruments, designs, methods for gathering and analyzing data, etc. can be perfectly integrated into our approach. The growing development has also been transferred, in spite of initial and traditional opposition, into a greater influence and presence in other areas of "public service," such as medicine, community attention, sociology, social psychology and education. [84]

#### *4.3.3 Main areas and topics contributing to the development of narrative inquiry*

Not wanting to reiterate topics already described, nor trying to simplify such a broad area, it would be fair to highlight a few methodological contributions and developments that, without themselves necessarily being biographical-narrative, have contributed to the development of narrative inquiry. Here it is possible to provide only a partial overview, as a way of indicating what is occurring throughout the social science. [85]

In the areas of anthropology and ethnology, there have been important contributions, both in its forms and its postures. From the start, ethnographic research is narrative, and it constructs a written discourse with which to describe, interpret and enable others to understand. Thus, it has been providing clues since the pioneering biographical reports of anthropological studies, through analyses of discourses about the other which must be deconstructed, up to studies of culture as text. But it has also had its own debates, which have ended up strengthening certain options and revealing certain dangers<sup>33</sup>. [86]

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32 Cf. the increase in computer programs and packages that help in this effort, and the growing interest on the part of social researchers in them, with their use in biographical-narrative research shown (CISNEROS, 2003).

33 Cf. in this sense the criticism that it is possible to lose scientific spirit with some of the uses and approaches more common to literary accounts than to empirical studies, as denounced by

Another contribution comes from philosophy, mainly by consolidating the epistemological basis of biographical-narrative inquiry<sup>34</sup>. Here we can highlight the power of reflection by means of which an account has value as a tool to reveal identity, reinterpret it, and project it toward the future. Likewise, there is an insistence that reflection in and about an account arrests history and makes it possible to understand it, access its meaning, its significance, the reason that inspires it, etc, surpassing its merely historical or textual flow (REYES MATE, 1993)<sup>35</sup> In addition to penetrating into worlds that were traditionally hidden, such as identity and individual and collective memory (ZAMBRANO, 1971; FERNÁNDEZ PRIETO, 1994), philosophy has also been relevant for its analysis of the contingencies of post modernity (ARFUCH, 2002; BOLÍVAR, 2001). All this provides a foundation for "other visions." [87]

Hermeneutics, the philosophy of history and fundamental theology have produced important developments—although ignored in the scientific community—analyzing the question of our sense of history and events from a theological perspective. This has caused a group of authors to insist on the value of narrative as a path to knowledge of this historical sense, with interesting contributions to the biographical-narrative approach<sup>36</sup>. Progress in the analyses of narrative and literary texts (AYALA, 1970; LOZANO, PEÑA-MARÍN & ABRIL, 1982), although based on linguistic models, has helped us understand the plot and deep significance of accounts, and it offers clues about how to elaborate narrative reports so that they will be comprehensible and readable (ACEVES, 1992). Together with these analyses of linguistic structures, cognitive structures and the processes used in comprehension, memory and expression of these narratives are also important. Thus, in psychology there has been emphasis on studies of memory and the recovery of actions, events, meanings... On this point, the studies by APARISI (1993) and CAÑAS and BAJO (1991) on autobiographical memory stand out. These studies would compliment other perspectives coming from the area of sociology (ALONSO, 1998; BAEZA, 2003; CISNEROS, 2000), history (MENJÍVAR, ARGUETA & SOLANO, 2005; MORALES, 1988) and the history of education (ESCOLANO & HERNÁNDEZ, 2002). [88]

As far as the most relevant dimensions of study are concerned, these have been developed primarily around oral history, life stories, autobiographies and cultural portraits. But other areas are emerging strongly. One of them comes from feminism, which, in addition to describing the world of women, defends their voices, dismantles prejudices and supports social change (CASEY, 2004; FIGUEROA, 1996; LOUREIRO, 1994; MARTÍNEZ-SALGADO, 1996; MASSOLO,

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LLOBERA (1990) or the analysis of the situation elaborated by PALTÍ (1997).

34 Cf. the studies by BRUNER (1991) and RICOEUR (1987 and 1996), and the reflections on this latter author compiled in CALVO and ÁVILA (1991).

35 In this argument, the construction of the *Iberoamerican Encyclopedia of Philosophy* was very useful (REYES MATE, 1993), combining efforts in the Iberoamerican setting.

36 Cf. the contribution of the Dominican Martín GELABERT (1995) and his work group in Valencia, using narrativity as a means of interpreting and transmitting the revelation. Several articles appear around this group (COLOMA, 1998) and courses (taught by Juan Antonio TUDELA in the Cycle of the Historical Theology Degree of the School of Theology in Valencia or in the Comillas Circle) that apply, justify or develop the biographical-narrative approach as a research tool.

1992). Another topic is the area of the forgotten underworld, exclusion and discrimination (BORDERÍAS, 1997)<sup>37</sup>. Likewise, there is another view of education and the school, with interesting studies that describe everyday life in the school and the teaching profession (GONZÁLEZ MONTEAGUDO, 1996; VIDIGAL, 1996), orientation and professional identity (BOLÍVAR et al., 1999; CORREIA, 1991), the development of educational organizations (DOMINGO & BOLÍVAR, 1996), the life cycles of teachers (SAMPER, 1992; FERNÁNDEZ, 1995) and professional development based on narratives of experience— inherited from the French and Portuguese tradition—(NOVOA, 1988, 1992; NOVOA & FIGER, 1988; AMIGUINHO, 1992; CANÁRIO, 1994; RIVAS & SEPÚLVEDA, 2003), and the uses and abuses of the life stories of teachers (BOLÍVAR, 2005; GIL, 1999; PUIG, 1993). [89]

#### 4.3.4 Methodological contributions and developments experienced with the "biographical symptom"

The biographical method is supposedly limited to and associated with specific areas of study that are generally less accessible using other methods (drugs, old age, women, homosexuality, war experiences, prostitution, etc.). For these topics this perspective offers a potent viewpoint from which to make these worlds visible. Constituting a strong tradition throughout the last century and integrating all the contributions that qualitative research could offer, around the 1990's there was a moment of great growth and advancement. This was called the "biographical symptom" (MARINAS & SANTAMARINA 1993, p.11). [90]

In the 1990's, there were important international contributions along these lines, such as the classic *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994) and, more specifically, the studies by DENZIN (1989) on "interpretive biography" and "symbolic interactionism," and, more characteristic of this approach (PENEFF, 1990). A whole series of chapters and books appeared that tried to demonstrate and systematize the field within qualitative research. It is sufficient to take a look at the following references, key to this growth in popularity in the scientific community:

- The publication of a monograph on oral history in the *International Sociology Journal* (1988);
- the appearance of journals like *History and Oral Source* and *Recovered Voices*, which, in addition to popularizing and spreading oral history, brought together important contributions and provided indispensable theoretical-methodological tools for carrying out this type of research;
- the proliferation of meetings, events and forums in which attention was increasingly paid to oral history and biographical methods;
- publication of chapters in books or manuals that presented and developed the biographical-narrative methodology (ACEVES, 1992; PUJADAS, 1992, De MIGUEL, 1996) and approaches, both new and old, that pay more attention to feelings, loyalty, the pursuit of truth, witnesses, etc. (APARISI, 1993):

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37 A topic that the Journal *History, Anthropology and Oral Sources* refers to repeatedly.

- the publication of an important compilation of work on oral history methodology (MARINAS & SANTAMARINA, 1993; MORALES, 1988). [91]

Thanks to all these, we have received many fresh contributions by first class authors such as BERTAUX, FERRAROTI, CATANI and DENZIN, among others, who provide novel topics and approaches. At the same time, an important phase has begun of documentation, foundation and fieldwork, which has led to a series of manuals, already named here, that definitively specify and systematize the research approach. We refer to works such as the ones by PUJADAS (1992), De MIGUEL (1996) and the bibliographical review by BOLÍVAR et al. (1998). All of these are ventures that bring an identity to biographical inquiry, as well as promoting a penetration into and methodological openness to all the qualitative proposals that can be used and that provide methodological richness to the approach. [92]

The powerful line of study using the biographical-narrative approach has been greatly strengthened by the contributions coming from in-depth interviews or oral/written accounts that focus on a specific topic or life episodes. These evolve and increase in their capacity for understanding and the pursuit of truth, by participating in truly dialectic processes of a common search for a possible/credible and accorded truth. It is not enough now to gather documents, with the objective of showing "the hidden" or to aid in denouncing and emancipating. Now this must be done with certain guarantees of truthfulness and based on choices that respect the dialectic processes of negotiation and the search for truth that are generated in such situations. In this sense, it is useful to point out the methodological contributions stemming from the use of cascades of successive depth similar to those proposed by KELCHTERMANS, widely used and spread by the FORCE group in Granada (by linking this methodology at the time of developing professional profiles), which is echoed in the work systematizing the field elaborated by BOLÍVAR and others (2001). [93]

From then until today, many doctoral research projects and lines of investigation in diverse areas have used and strengthened this perspective. But, as MARINAS (2004) argued, not all of what is produced under the broad umbrella of the biographical symptom is significant or relevant. There is a lot of banal material that is a result of fashion and the momentary media attention to this new type of material. [94]

#### *4.3.5 Narrative inquiry*

The boom experienced by narrative inquiry, coming to a great extent from the analogy made by GEERTZ between social phenomena and texts, and from the hermeneutic turn in the social sciences, means that narrative inquiry today is the interface and intersection or transversal axis among different social sciences. This results in a double impact, as a methodological transgression upon the traditional uses of other methods<sup>38</sup>, and as a setting where new, previously

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38 On the cataloging of historical truth, a good study would be that by VÁZQUEZ (1998).

inaccessible, lines of research and objects of study are configured, broadening the field—from its "hinge" position between the theory of action and of ethics—to include any form of oral or written reflection that is based on personal experience<sup>39</sup>. [95]

In this framework, there has been a noted presence of translated works, general studies in qualitative research and more specific ones in biographical-narrative<sup>40</sup>. Thus, the influence of RICOEUR (1987, 1996), MacINTYRE (1987) and BRUNER (1988) has been vital. With the eruption of the Anglo-Saxon tradition<sup>41</sup> in narrative studies and accounts of experience that one sees in studies like that by LARROSA et al. (1995), another important qualitative leap was made. [96]

Biographical narration offers a conceptual and methodological framework for analyzing essential aspects of the development of a society or a profession in the lifetime of a person, and it marks "their" personal lines and expectations for advancement, providing a biographical framework that makes the complexity of life, and human and social action, intelligible. Life can be interpreted as a story, something fundamental to understanding human action and knowledge. Thus, RICOEUR pointed out that interpreting the text of an action is interpreting oneself<sup>42</sup> and McEWAN openly identified narrative as "the proper way to characterize human actions." [97]

As argued at other times (BOLÍVAR, 2002), narrative not only expresses important dimensions of lived experience, but, more radically, it intervenes in experience and configures the social construction of reality. BRUNER (1988) pointed out that narrative is not just a methodology, it is also a way to construct reality. Taking over reality and its individual and collective meanings, it is another equally legitimate form of knowledge. Biographical reconstruction is a game of intersubjectivity that emerges essentially from the person and their testimony, whether oral or written. [98]

On the basis of narrative one recognizes the properties of meaning, of interpretation and the claim to truth, which in the past were strongly objected to. Consequently, declarations by great writers, with a very real conception of memory and truth (FERNÁNDEZ PRIETO, 1994) also help to strengthen this perspective. Thus, BORGES (1975) says that a personal account will be true to reality or, in any case, to the personal recollection of reality, which is the same thing, or AYALA (1970) points out that when writing (telling) an autobiography, one invents, discovers and reinterprets oneself. This is determinant in that what we are depends on the way we understand ourselves and how we construct texts about ourselves (BÁRCENA, 1997). [99]

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39 Cf. the prolific and interesting study by CLANDININ and CONNELLY (1994).

40 Cf., among others, CALVO and ÁVILA (1991), BEGUÉ (2002) or BÁRCENA and MÈLICH (2000).

41 We refer, amongst others, to the work by CONNELLY and CLANDININ (1995) or the collection by McEWAN and EGAN (1998).

42 In this sense, José Luís ARANGUREN, in the setting of summer courses in El Escorial (1990), commented, "each person is a text in the sense that each of us writes his own story throughout his life."

Furthermore, a narrative approach prioritizes a dialogic self, its relational and communal nature, where subjectivity is a social construction, intersubjectively formed in communicative discourse. The interplay of subjectivities, in a dialectic process, becomes a privileged way of building knowledge. [100]

Narrative inquiry makes it possible to represent a set of dimensions of experience that formal research leaves out, being unable to describe relevant aspects (feelings, objectives, desires, etc.). With narrative there is an emphasis on the value of the experience and the accumulated wisdom which, as BRUNER states, is integrated into knowledge and made public through narration. He states that when telling or writing down a case there is a greater degree of awareness and elaboration of it. [101]

What is important is the dialectic knowledge that emerges around a biographical account. The dilemma between the truthfulness of an account and the intentions that guide it is overcome, understanding memory as a mechanism for searching for meaning in events according to previous lived experience, the context in which they are produced and the capacity for interpreting the current reality, and not only as a warehouse of experiences and resources one can draw on. The ability to make the interior world emerge is no longer the main issue. Instead the interrelationships, cognitions and elements that intervene and that are able to aid in reconstructing and understanding the interior world are more important. It is no longer enough to just tell, but instead to enter a dialogue (with oneself and with the researcher) and negotiate the meaning, writing it down to facilitate understanding, and to reach a new dialectical awareness shared by informant and researcher<sup>43</sup>. [102]

In this way, the distance between oral and written accounts, which is a question of support, is overcome, to strengthen and give substance to the biographical-narrative approach (the perspective and its use, not the technology used by the sources). It has even been stated that the account itself serves to represent the rooted and elaborated knowledge that emerged throughout the process, from the events themselves, to becoming aware of them, and to the public exposure of the meanings, nuances and interpretations given to them throughout the account. In this sense, LINDON (1999) has explored the relationships and limits between experience and narration, and he places autobiographical narratives in the terrain of collective memory, ethical and aesthetic motivations and socialization processes. [103]

Thus, there is a great qualitative leap toward change, awareness, identity<sup>44</sup>, the value of the subjective, commitment, memory, the integration of new

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43 In the study by Remei ARNAUS, in Jorge LARROSA et al. (1995), there is an accurate inventory taken of the situation, balancing the value of the voices that tell and those that interpret, and about the necessarily shared authorship of the account.

44 With it the consideration of the personal world of the professionals is begun to be taken seriously, with recent studies on identity, life cycles, processes of personal, professional and institutional development. One example with certain transcendence in the field may be provided in the study by BOLÍVAR and others (1999) on the professional life cycles of teachers, translated into Portuguese in Brazil (2002).

technologies, perspectives and methodological uses validated in related disciplines and in scientific treatment. The idea is to discover regularities and particularisms, without demonizing or demeaning the reports or the sources, and to know how to relativize and contextualize, without succumbing to pretentious generalizations. [104]

#### *4.3.6 Methodological contributions and developments after the "biographical rationalization"*

After the increase in popularity of the biographical-narrative approach among researchers, which meant a rapid increase in its use and produced an initial thematic and methodological convergence, it was seen as a strong perspective for looking in-depth at the complexity of topics that were personal, cultural, identity, sex, everyday issues, etc. Now, with less innocence, the approach has awakened an echo with some questions of interest regarding what to collect and how to analyze life accounts. These accounts require greater systematization in their collection and greater validation of the information, and they have certain limitations regarding their powers of generalization, compared to other pure samples that stick to the original discourse so as not to manipulate them. There are also new types of analysis and supports in the information technologies to strengthen qualitative analyses (CISNEROS, 2003)—paradigmatic or narrative—and these help to reorganize data and build comprehension within the complexity of the account, life, and society. [105]

In the end, the idea is to return to a reoccurring topic that has been dragged into the present. The intention was to collect good stories and good informants that would illustrate the understanding of what happened in that hidden, personal, marginal, everyday world, and at the same time defend the personal dimension of human development. For this purpose, although it would seem logical based on the philosophy of the model itself, it does not always signify an improvement in the conditions of informants, or their emancipation. It can become mere testimonialism, or a demonstration without delving into the deeper social reality. Even worse, it can turn into a potent instrument of political access to and control over personal fields and dimensions that were previously hidden, which in the majority of cases would take over the voice of the protagonists or subvert it <sup>45</sup>. [106]

A critical vision emerges about the usefulness and uses of the biographical-narrative method. With this process of consolidation, there is also a serious debate taking place—initiated by POLKINGHORNE (1995) and echoed by BOLÍVAR (2002). On the one hand, there are supporters of paradigmatic analyses stemming from qualitative research—more disposed to making categorical analyses of information and using computer packages that aid in research. On the other hand, there are others—like BOURDIEU—who are more purist and, from the native point of view, try to manipulate the information as little as possible to the extent of preferring to show only the evidence through the

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45 BOLÍVAR (2005), reflecting the repeated warnings expressed in this sense by DENZIN (1991) or GOODSON, describes the limitations of the life histories of teachers and the dangers of certain unhealthy and self-interested uses of these accounts of professional life.



voice of the protagonists, without later interpretation. And there are still others who—in line with what is proposed by the reviewers—try to find a productive equilibrium between the two extremes. [107]

Given these proposals, and increasingly aware of the importance of the credibility and validity of qualitative research (FLICK, 2004), researchers have begun to look into sequential triangulation models (BOLÍVAR, FERNÁNDEZ & MOLINA, 2004), which advance along these lines and overcome the methodological triviality that some assign to certain uses of the approach. With all this in mind, readapting the conversation between CISNEROS (2004) and MORSE, there is a need to do more and better qualitative research. This is now the main challenge, and the necessary contribution today would be to make a complete revision of its epistemological status, which would complement a job that, basically, RICOEUR (1987, 1996) did in the narrative field. [108]

As we have defended and explained extensively in a recent book (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 2001), narrative inquiry is a specific research approach with its own credibility and legitimacy for building knowledge in the social sciences. It defends, therefore, a different form of the conventional qualitative paradigm, without being limited to a methodology of collecting and analyzing data. Telling one's own experiences and "reading" (in the sense of interpreting) these events and actions, in the light of the stories that actors narrate, becomes a peculiar research *perspective*. [109]

## 5. Epilogue and Closing

In closing this necessarily incomplete overview of biographical-narrative research in the Iberoamerican setting, some final reflections can be synthesized:

As we stated in another review of biographical-narrative research (BOLÍVAR, DOMINGO & FERNÁNDEZ, 1998, p.7), now reaffirmed after this new and limited overview, this research approach has been shown—both epistemologically and practically—to be a legitimate way to build knowledge. It goes beyond a simple methodology, to place itself—also in an Iberoamerican setting—in a true perspective of its own, situated in the much broader space of qualitative research in the social sciences, in agreement with certain tendencies and positions of postmodern sensitivity. [110]

On the other hand, examining the development of the panorama in the Iberoamerican setting has allowed us to learn a lot about it, about its particularities and the sense in which it is used and the main problems and solutions that have been dealt with. From this comes the intention to integrate significantly, and with a certain discursive coherence, the variety and heterogeneity of developments, contributions and perspectives coming from very different approaches, in order to construct a "new vision" in the Iberoamerican setting. It has been observed how progressively—often with much more determination and imagination than means—there has been a construction of projects, processes, designs and arguments that are more and more solid,

complex and whole, and owe a debt to an already well-consolidated tradition. There is a complex scene (heterogeneous and multidisciplinary) in which the topic and problems have been diagnosed that were deserving of attention. Approaches and ways of proceeding were consolidated, and significant advancements were made in the discursive construction of this ethnographic line of research. And with all of this, we recognize ourselves in some bases from which to face our doubts and certainties when orienting and taking on future research along these lines. [111]

And, finally, we would like to point out that the Iberoamerican setting is, without doubt, a rich environment for delving into the topics, approach, dilemmas and reasons that support this research approach. Biographical-narrative research, within the Iberoamerican geographical and cultural scene, has experienced noteworthy development and made significant contributions to the whole of qualitative research and to other scenarios, in constant interaction with the main approaches that have flourished internationally. Its development has not been to copy or follow slavishly other external contributions—most of them Anglo Saxon —, but instead contributions from diverse peripheries (cultural, national and thematic, very particular for various reasons) have given substance to the approach. It is not the only path followed, but it has set in place important bases for building this perspective epistemologically, methodologically and culturally. It is possible to conclude that this method has sufficient contributions (both quantitative and qualitative) that—with justice—it may be taken into account in order to strengthen lines of study and work within this well-established perspective. Biographical-narrative research has gone from small and very specific analyses, as a marginal methodology and one with a small group of experts and topics, to having a whole set of topics, formal and structural methodological approaches, and epistemological and meta-analysis developments of its own. Consequently, it has become integrated into many areas of reflection and lines of study, so that today it is a relevant approach under the global umbrella of qualitative research. Thus, this overview is also a vindication of the need to recognize the value of the "Iberoamerican" in the field of social research. [112]

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