

BIOGRAPHICAL TRANSITIONS AND ADULT LEARNING : SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

The current text presents the research questions and the objectives of the research project entitled ‘‘Changing Living and Working Conditions, Lifelong Learning and Biography in a New Economy’’. However, at this time we are unable to present any findings as the research is still in the phase of field data collection. The interviews that are being conducted in the greater Toronto area and greater Montreal area will allow us to understand if and how the participation in adult learning activities come into play at moments of personal and professional biographical transition. In this context, we have tried here to define the theoretical and methodological orientations that are at the fundamentals of our work.

1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

One of the approaches that allows better understanding of our research objectives is the study of ‘Intellectual and Learning Trajectory’. Our interest for the educational biography derives especially from the research on participation in adult learning, defined as the meeting point of supply and demand of socially structured educational programs, as well as of the relation between structured and informal learning. At a theoretical level, we can analyse adult learning in relation to the organisation and provision of educational programs, the image, shape and accessibility of which influence the participation, but we can also study the meaning of learning events and experiences in people’s life course. A first analytical approach consists of understanding the production of this organisation and specifying its influence on participation. In order to do this, we can consider following approaches:

- The organisation of adult learning activities heavily depends on public educational policies. The analysis should be done on policy making and, hence, on the tensions/negotiations leading to the formulation of normative orientation, planning of activities and resources distribution.

- The local offer of educational programs, which includes the way local actors and educational institutions adapt (or do not adapt) to the policies¹ does influence participation. (Henry et Basile) ;
- The analysis of public policies and their implementation at a regional or local level (by educational institutions) is not sufficient. We also need to examine the role of policies of employers (public and private institutions), and of educational market. In this context, distinction between the two is important as the enterprises (or the employers) are in an intermediary position. They occupy spaces in both demand and supply sides of educational programs. On one hand, they depend on the services of external providers (private or public) and on the other, they are also planners of educational offer.

A second approach refers to the social and cultural outlook inherited or acquired by the social actors that build their relationship to lifelong learning. These dispositions or the 'cultural capital' induces a relationship to learning and adult education by playing a role in the evaluation of relevance (valence) of participation and the odds for success (expectancy) (Rubenson, 1997). In case of informal learning, these dispositions also influence the participation by identifying the learning need and educational value. The heaviest factor in identifying the learning needs is the background education and the proximity with the culture of writing (Doray, Bélanger et Laponté, 2004 ; Doray and Livingstone, in process). Background education is also the strongest predictor of the participation in informal learning activities². The weight of dispositions produced by the background experiences underlines the importance of our interest in individual biographies.

The living and working conditions that form an important part of individual biographies highlight the third way to look at participation: the changing conditions of existence in order to grasp how life transitions shape this participation. Both point towards access to two social resources: money and time. Moreover, the most frequently mentioned reasons for non-participation in job related training are the high cost and lack of time (Peters, 2004). Apart from this, the conciliation between work/family/studies is a factor to be taken into consideration during analysis. The working conditions influence access to educational and training resources through socio-professional positioning and the characteristics of an enterprise³ (Doray, Bélanger Motte et Labonté, 2004). The biographical approach adds a major dimension by taking into account the changes in conditions of existence all through the life course.

Our general objective is to understand the relationship between changing living and working conditions and lifelong learning in the context of emergence of the new economy. More specifically, we want to understand how, throughout personal and professional life course, the relation between critical changes and learning practices moves, as well as how people re-examine (or not) their representation of learning practices and activities.

The initial questions of the general research program need thus further specification:

¹ Incorporating the factors such as the types of proposed activities, domains of educational programs, timing and schedules etc and other related factors such as access to public transport.

² This expression is not necessarily the best. In strict sense of the word, it should probably be rephrased as 'identification of educational value of a social activity'.

³ i.e. socio-economic condition of the enterprise, human resources management policies, degree of formalization the management or regime of industrial relations.

- How changing conditions in enterprise affect, all along one's biography, the individual work situation and employment, accessibility to educational resources and meanings of adult learning?
- How biographical transitions like health change, moving and family change affect meaning of participation in adult education?
- How individuals cope with changes, to that end may resort to learning practices and reinforce or change the representation of learning?
- How different meanings given to formal and informal learning relate to changes in the workplace?
- How cultural and social dispositions, shaped and reshaped by the first educational experience, adult education experience and former transition period, influence the perceptions and attitudes relative to learning?
- What assessment individual does about the role of different mode of learning?

Once these objectives are outlined and these questions asked, the next step is to define the approaches and methodology appropriate to pertinent data collection. The qualitative approach in general and more specifically, the biographical analysis is most suited to achieving our objectives. It will allow us to understand how different dimensions or factors articulate in the decision making process to participate in a learning activity. In other words, we will look for the materials necessary to reconstruct the decision taken by an individual by identifying intermediaries that link various structural factors of participation.

2. HISTORICAL AND ANALYTICAL ROOTS OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

The biographical tradition actually goes back to the Socratic 'bios'- "perceived as a means of giving birth to consciousness" (Pineau, 1994, 299). This tradition was soon replaced, however, by the elite use of the form for the purposes of social communication. This elite domination of the biographical and autobiographical forms continued in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century. At this point, both the biography and the autobiography began to be used in journalism and literature to portray the lives of the 'common man' (Ibid.). It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the biographical approach was adopted by the social sciences as a means of exploring the lives and social realities of this 'everyday person', most famously by Thomas and Znaniecki of the 'Chicago school' (Ibid., 302)⁴.

2.1 THE STORY OF THE LIFE HISTORY

The landmark study by Thomas and Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1984), is most often cited as the earliest direct ancestor of the life history method in sociology. And while it may not be the earliest example of this approach in the social sciences⁵, it certainly is one of the most exhaustive examples of a life history. Moreover, it firmly established the methodological reasoning behind such an approach.

In describing the experience of Polish peasants emigrating to the United States, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* uses letters, dairies and autobiographical accounts. According to Thomas and Znaniecki:

⁴ It is also worth noting that in Germany, Dilthey explored the potential of the 'biographical form' in the social sciences in *L'édification du monde historique dans les sciences humaines* (1910) (Delory-Momberger, 2003, 29).

⁵ Dilthey's treatise aside, life histories and autobiographies of Native American chiefs were being written by anthropologists and their 'subjects' at the turn of the century (Goodson, 2001, 129).

In analyzing the experiences and attitudes of an individual, we always reach data and elementary facts which are exclusively limited to this individual's personality, but can be treated as mere incidences of more or less general classes of data or facts, and can thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming....But even if we are searching for abstract laws, life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material...(Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920, 1831-1832 in *Ibid.*, 130)

The validity of the individual life as a representation of social reality is a debate that still rages today in the discussion of the biographical approach. Needless to say, the life history method enjoyed immense popularity in sociology until the 1930s, when it was ousted by quantitative sociologists and was finally relegated to the margins of sociological practice for several decades⁶.

In discussing the contributions of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* and, more generally, of the life history method at the beginning of the twentieth century, Plummer (1983) laments that "it is unlikely that they [life histories] will gain much support in the future" (Plummer, 1983, 61). He could not have been farther from the truth. The life history method regained some of its popularity in the 1970s and was then decidedly rehabilitated by Daniel Bertaux (1981) in *Biography and Society* (Goodson, 2001, 133). Since the 1980s, it has witnessed a significant resurgence and is now widely used in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics and education (Pineau *et al.*, 1983, 10).

2.2 WHAT IS THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH?

a) What is the life history?

In tracing the roots of the biographical approach⁷, it is necessary to look at the life history not only because that is the biographical approach's most obvious ancestry, but also because the two terms are often used interchangeably (see, for example, Lainé, 1998). In fact, while the term life history has been the most prevalent in sociological research, it is often used interchangeably with 'oral history', 'life narrative', and 'life story'. This lack of terminological clarity lead Luken and Vaughan (1999) to consider all of these terms, as well as biography and 'autobiography', in their critique of the life history method in sociology. Pineau attributes this lack of consensus to "a hesitation as to the meaning to be accorded to these attempts in the direct and subjective expression of human lived experience" (Pineau in Alheit *et al.*, 1995, 45).

The life history is generally viewed as the narrative of an individual's life, whether in autobiographical or biographical form, as well as, but not necessarily including, other

⁶ In fact, the technique was widely and continuously used in Poland since *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920). "Over the last sixty years, hundreds of thousands of *pamiętniki* (written, topical memoirs) have been collected from young peasants, industrial workers, unemployed men and women...But due to the linguistic barrier, this work remains unknown outside of Poland" (Bertaux, 1981, 6).

⁷ For the purposes of this research paper, we will refer to those approaches which uses the life history, whether in biographical or autobiographical form, as the biographical approach. This is in part to maintain some sort of consistency in terminology, partly to avoid confusion with some specific approaches which use a similar terminology, and partly to indicate the difference between the original life history methodology developed at the beginning of the century and 'life history research' being undertaken today.

documents pertaining to that individual's life⁸. According to Plummer (1983), "the human document is an account of individual experience which reveals the individual's actions as a human agent and as a participant in social life" (p. 13). But the cornerstone of the life history is indeed the autobiographical or biographical narrative of the individual's life (Ibid., 14). Although Plummer also maintains that ideally the life history should concern itself with the entire life of the individual, this has been contested by other researchers who have used the life history method to focus on a specific aspect of the individual's life, such as in biographies that deal specifically with educational trajectories (see, for example, West, 1996).

The life history method, then, focuses on an individual's lived experience. It transforms the individual from being an 'object of history' to an 'agent of history' (Pineau, 1994, 302). According to Denzin, it is "the unfolding history of one person's...experiences. This feature becomes a hallmark of the life history – the capturing of events over time" (Denzin in Luken and Vaughan, 1999, 406). Plummer stipulates that:

Experience is a stream, a flow; social structures are seamless webs of criss-crossing negotiations; biographies are in a constant state of becoming and as they evolve so their subjective accounts of themselves evolve. There is no static conception of the world in interactionist thought but one in which flux, emergence, precariousness and change are persistent facts at all levels of analysis. (Plummer, 1983, 55)

In this statement, Plummer emphasizes not only the ever-changing nature of an individual's life, but also of social structures. He also clearly positions the life history technique in the camp of interactionism and, therefore, as contradicting such theoretical perspectives as structuralism (we will further discuss this issue in *Debating the biographical approach*). Moreover, Plummer highlights the personal and subjective nature of the life history approach, which, in his view, is a necessary part of understanding social reality:

All perspectives dangle from some person's problematic. Views, truths and conceptions of the real can never be wholly ripped away from the people who experience them. Hence one fundamental source of knowledge again is the biography and the life history which grasps the sense of reality that people have about their own world. (Plummer, 1983, 57)

The life history thus becomes not only an account of subjective experience but also a window on the social world outside of the individual.

b)What is a biographical approach?

Interpretations of the biographical approach in sociology involve as many terminological and methodological confusions as those regarding the life history technique. This may be explained, in part, by the fact that the biographical approach is, essentially, the life history method. In fact, in his exploration of the biographical approach, *Biography and Society*, Bertaux, for example, frequently refers to 'life histories'⁹.

⁸ We would maintain that, while the life history is the narrative of the individual's life, complimented by other documents pertaining to her or his life, by the sheer nature of the terminology employed, the 'life narrative' and the 'life story' are solely the narrative without additional documents.

⁹ The terminology is further complicated by such books as *Writing Educational Biography* (Kridel, 1998) in which the editor refers to the biographical approach or the life history method as "case study research" and uses

b1) The theoretical basis of the biographical approach

In that it is based upon the individual's account of their life and the world around them, the biographical approach, like the life history, focuses primarily on the individual's lived experience. However, again, the emphasis is not on the internal world of that individual: "biography is the study of an individual in society or, in other words, it comprises an understanding of the relations between agency and structure with reference to that individual" (Scott in Erben, 1998, 33). Erben contends that the individual as the 'biographical subject' reveals the inseparable link between individuality and the social:

the biographical subject will always blur the boundaries between the abstract notion of a unique self and the abstract notion of group identity. Far from being a methodological stumbling block there is here recognition that the self is constituted in the indissolubility of ego and sociality. (Erben, 1998, 6)

However, while this focus on the individual allows for an understanding of the individual in the social context, it should not be neglected that this approach reveals an implied belief in the 'individualization' of modern society. In other words, in valuing the individual subjective experience over wider social structures, the biographical approach implies that the individual can, at least to a limited extent, determine his/her own life course.

Among advocates of the biographical approach, it should be noted that this well-established focus on the individual in the 'biographical method' is not without its opponents. In remarking that "the biographical method has almost always addressed itself to the individual" (Ferrarotti in Bertaux, 1981, 26), Ferrarotti challenges that:

this choice has the banality of a truism, yet it conceals a gross misunderstanding. For the individual is not, as it is believed too often, a social atom, the most elementary of heuristic sociological units....The individual is not the founder of the social, but rather its sophisticated product. (Ibid.)

He therefore suggests that the individual biography is abandoned for the biography of "the primary group" which would be interpreted as "the basic heuristic unit of a renewed biographical method" (Ferrarotti in Bertaux, 1981, 24).

B) The methodological basis of the biographical approach

While most sociological research which labels itself as biographical focuses on an individual's narration of his or her life, it can, in fact, involve much more than a personal narration. According to Erben (1998), the 'biographical method' involves "the collection of documents from a wide variety of sources from a variety of media" (p. 4). Thus, much like in Plummer's (1983) account of what constitutes a life history, the 'biographical method' includes the use of autobiographies or biographies, photographs, videos, official records,

biography in the literary sense. Moreover, given that the biographical approach is used in a number of disciplines, such as psychology and anthropology, as well as sociology, the definitions of what constitutes this approach will vary widely.

letters, diaries and family trees, to name just a few of the possible sources of information that can be used in this approach (Erben, 1998, 5). However, this interpretation is not necessarily a consensus, and Dominicé contends that “one important methodological issue is defining what kinds of materials we can identify as a biography” (Dominicé, 2000, 62).

Another question of methodological importance which is neither answered in the literature on life histories nor in that which refers to the biographical approach, is what the minimum conditions that a life story must meet are, in order to be considered part of the biographical approach. In other words, “on what basis can an oral interview or a written text about personal experiences be taken as biography?” (Ibid.). Given that a large amount of biographical or life history research is focused on a specific topic, and is therefore somewhat limited in nature, it would seem that this question is particularly pressing.

3. DEBATING THE BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

3.1 CONTESTED THEORETICAL TERRAIN

The legitimacy of the biographical approach in sociology is hot and contested terrain. Its advocates insist on its strengths as vehemently as its opponents criticize its potential pitfalls. According to Bertaux, the life history approach offers new avenues to sociology and questions established assumptions:

The most interesting discovery was that collecting life stories means not only a new empirical practice, but also a step-by-step redefinition of the whole approach to sociological practice. It questions all accepted ideas: not only those which derive from the positivist tradition of empirical sociology, but also those who derive from the philosophical currents which are hegemonic in France, namely Marxism and structuralism. (Bertaux, 1981, 30-31)

One of the principle and longest running critiques of the life history method, and thus the biographical approach by association, is that the ‘life story’ does not constitute reliable sociological material. However, we argue like Bertaux upon the value of the biographical approach more so when it is possible, like in our project, to use it complementarily as a way to deepen the understanding of representative set a of data :

I would like to tell them [positivists] that their concern with the representativity of samples, with data analysis, with proof, can be met also with this reputedly ‘qualitative’ approach, and that this approach yields even more: a direct access to the level of *social relations* which constitute, after all, the very substance of sociological knowledge. (Bertaux, 1981, 31)

By considering a sub-set of the larger sample and looking more deeply, within this smaller group, at the meaning actors give to their various participation rates, by exploring how these changing levels of learning participation take meaning in relation to people’s idiosyncratic trajectories, we should be able to detect social trends that might not be detectable only with macro-level research. Such biographical approach should allow us to capture what more classical sociological methods cannot (Bertaux in Lainé, 1998, 67) and produce a unique complementary interpretation of the large survey data.

3.2 CONTESTED METHODOLOGICAL TERRAIN

As indicated above, another subject of contention is whether the biographical approach can be considered representative of social phenomena at a wider social level. Pineau, in quoting Domitila, from the well-known autobiographical life history, *Si on me donne la parole* (1978), positions himself in favour of even a single life history as a valid representation of the social. According to Domitila: “Cette histoire que je vais raconter, je ne veux surtout pas qu’on l’interprète seulement comme un problème personnel. Parce que je pense que ma vie est liée à mon peuple” (Domitila in Pineau, 1983, 9). However, while the individual subjective experience here is deemed as relevant in order to understand wider social phenomena, this does not mean that it is, in fact, representative. Bertaux suggests that applying the concept of saturation to the biographical approach would contribute to its representativity and would “confère une base très solide à la généralisation” (Bertaux in Lainé, 1998, 68).

While the idea of having a sample wide enough to reach a degree of ‘saturation’ might satisfy those who criticize the biographical approach for a lack of validity and representativity, this is actually rarely done in studies employing the biographical method. We have solve this by integrating the biographical analysis within a larger survey, so that the individuals selected for more intensive biographical analysis could be situated, through key independent and dependant variable, within the larger representative sample. The qualitative approaches will produce insights on the quantitative study by looking at connotations peoples give to their learning structured activities and experiences, by examining qualitatively, within a small sub-sample, the various meanings various people could give the same objective type or level of participation, by studying an independent variable that can only be grasped through qualitative approach: professional and personal life transition. Far from being conflictual, these two approaches, in such a research design, become fully complimentary.

A final issue which arises in contemplating the biographical approach is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participant or subject. The potential nuances and pitfalls of this relationship are not particular to the biographical approach and should, in fact, be considered in the practice of any qualitative social science. In discussing literary biographies, Kridel confers that:

The relationship between biographer and subject is, of course, complex and dynamic. Proximity presents puzzling problems tied to the interpretative need to get inside another’s life while simultaneously not getting lost, or worse, without settling the other person’s life space with our own characters. (Kridel, 1998, 26)

But, in fact, the relationship between researcher and informer can become much more complex than that. According to West (1996), as well as Scott (in Erben, 1998, 33), “all research is autobiographical” (West, 1996, 17). West, in fact, compares his experiences and motivations with many of the working-class participants in his study, with whom he shares a common heritage. Throughout the study, he speaks of feelings of empathy and mutual comprehension, not to mention of discomfort and awkwardness when the narratives become too personal. While some might suggest that this closeness to the participants would negatively affect the nature of the research and analysis, West insists that it afforded him “the basis of a deep and developing dialogue” (Ibid., 23). Moreover, he stipulates that “objectivist,

detached methods can alienate, disempower and silence people and impoverish their narratives...The capacity for dialogue and shared insights is strangled in its infancy” (Ibid., 19). Cary (1999) had a more problematic experience in which the very biographical nature of her research prompted one participant to delve into personal issues far beyond what Cary had anticipated. Her lack of preparation, as well as her lack of training in dealing with such issues, caused her difficulties in her relationship with this participant, as well as in accurately representing the participant’s experience at the time of analysis. Such discussions make it clear that we must not only consider the subjectivity of the narrator’s account in ‘biographical research’, but also that of the researcher, as both will affect the outcome of the research. Moreover, we should be particularly aware that, in inviting participants to discuss their lives, we may encounter issues which are difficult for both researcher and informant and which will, inevitably, have an impact on the research itself.

4. BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS AND ADULT EDUCATION

However, even a quick tour of the horizon allows us to observe coupling of biographical approach and adult education in diverse settings. In light of this plurality, we should avoid conjugating the biographical analysis on its own.

4.1 MICRO APPROACH : LIFE HISTORY AS EDUCATIVE TOOL

The first approach is shaped by an understanding that a ‘déinstitutionalisation’ of life course leads to taking charge of existence by an individual and hence to individual reflection on meaning of life. In this context, it is important to return to a diversified vision of adult learning that ‘requires reorganization of training in the social and personal spaces that characterize the adult life’ (Dominice, 1999, p. 143). The project aims to make adult learning an education to the adult life. This recognizes offering opportunities and resources to individuals in order to visualize different phases in the life course contributing to the production of biographical meaning. A mobilizable tool to materialize this is production of life histories. The reflective work on one’s own biography as required by life history, builds biographical coherence that presents meaning of their life to the individuals. This approach envisages the biographical work as an individual training tool through reflective work.

From the point of view of implementation of a comprehensive analysis of participation, this approach is indirectly useful. It should be recognised as an intervention that allows individuals to construct a trail of different life experiences and coherence among different social experiences. This reflective work is useful to its author as it could come close to a quasi-therapeutic exercise that allows one to comprehensively understand the meaning of life. In a slightly exaggerated way, it can be said that this approach puts adult learning at the centre stage of biographical inquiry while our objective is to use the biography to capture the meanings given to participation in adult learning. In this light, the biography cannot be taken as the exercise of coherence¹⁰ only. There is a need to create space for possible ruptures, look for contradictions that could exist in a life course, which could very well provide insights to an educational commitment.

¹⁰ Bertaux (1976, cited by Fond-Harmand) underlines that this research orientation is in fact impregnated by a biographical approach that constitutes of thinking or envisaging existence as a totality and life as a unit. In this context, there would be a confusion between biographical narration and biography itself, particularly narration, depending on how it is expressed: freely with minimum constraints or selective narration of significant events at the time of enunciation.

4.2 MACRO APPROACH : GENERATIONAL REPRESENTATION OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Antikainen and his team have conducted interviews with the Finnish people of different generations in order to find out their perception on their learning experiences and the meaning that they give to education including adult education. The authors try to specify the meaning of their learning experiences, which is defined as the experiences that guides an individual in his/her life or that transforms/reinforces his/her identity. The researchers study the differences based on social positioning and gender, but the final analysis is a testimony of generational differences of meanings of learning.

The authors maintain that Finland is particularly interesting for the purposes of this study due to the rapid transformation the country underwent in the twentieth century. Finland shifted from being a largely rural and agricultural society to an industrialized and urban one in a matter of decades. Antikainen et al. point out that the differences in standard of living and in perspective between the generations created by this transformation are reflected in attitudes towards education. The principal premise of the research is therefore that the variation in educational experience and attitudes are rooted in generational differences.

In their generational focus, the authors specify that they are attempting to identify "Finnish educational generations" (Ibid.: 297). A generation is defined as "a group of people born during the same period of time and united by similar life-experiences and by a chronologically coherent cultural background" (Ibid.). They base the definition of the educational generations not only on age but also on common educational experiences (Antikainen et al, 1999: 213). They then place these experiences in the context of national culture and the economic transformation of the country.

The researchers identified three generations, which serve to highlight the transformations in the educational experiences of Finns. The oldest generation was born before 1935 and, in the words of Antikainen et al., "life was a struggle for the older generation, and education was an ideal for them" (Antikainen et al., 2002: 211). The next generation, born between 1936 and 1955, lived in a period of increasing socio-economic opportunities. They saw education "as a means to career progression" (Ibid.: 210). The youngest generation in this study was born after 1956 and have enjoyed living in a social welfare society in which there have been growing educational opportunities. They take education for granted and interpret it as a commodity (Ibid.).

Antikainen et al. explain that those who were born before 1936 lived in times of hardship and had little access to education but that "what they learned, stayed and developed within them" (Ibid.: 211). The authors describe a very segmented society in which individuals were defined, among other things, by the level of education they had attained and by class background (Ibid.). However, Antikainen et al. found that the depiction of "education as an ideal" permeated societal divisions and was shared by all individuals. Interestingly, most of the respondents of this generation spoke not of formal educational experiences, but of popular education - a marked difference from the next generation.

The middle generation lived through significant societal transformations. The large wave of migration from the rural areas of Finland to the urban centres was part of a wider structural change experienced by the country. It was in this period that the education system was restructured. Amongst the older segment of this generation, the children of the middle class took advantage of these changes. However, this was not the case for the younger segment.

Antikainen et al. noticed that, amongst this younger portion, the children of the lower classes began to attend upper secondary school along with the more privileged classes. Regardless of the differences in this generation, the authors found that, as a whole, an "instrumental" meaning was given to education (Ibid.: 213). The principle focus of their life stories was work and education seems to have been regarded as a resource for career attainment.

The youngest generation has an entirely different focus on life and this is reflected in their perception of education. According to Antikainen et al., this generation places a great amount of meaning in hobbies and feels that "their own identity is a problem" (Ibid.: 213). While education has still maintained its "instrumental" role, it seems to have lost some of its value. It is commonly viewed as a part of everyday life and, as a result, is seen as boring and unsatisfying. In fact, Antikainen et al. go further, remarking that education is often taken for granted and, as part of a consumer-oriented society, is seen as a commodity.

The authors do, however, point to an exception to this tendency. Apparently, amongst the younger generation, some individuals see education as a means of attaining a personal or social dream. Such aspirations might be very personal in nature or they might be international in scope, such as for those involved in the environmental or feminist movements. These individuals find meaning in some elements of institutional education and, in assigning it a role similar to the "old liberal adult education model" (Ibid.: 216), they use it to "live a life according to their own values" (Ibid.).

Antikainen et al. derived a number of other conclusions from the research. They reduced education to four categories (Antikainen, 1998: 230). The first category defines "education as resource", and somewhat resembles Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. Another category presents "education as status". However, the authors point out that the more educated a population is, the less direct the relationship between education and status becomes. The third category is "education as conformity", as schooling has served to diminish the cultural differences between ethnic minorities and the dominant Finnish culture. Lastly, he claims that education produces "individualization", particularly in the society in which individuals are seen as clients of educational institutions.

Houtsonen analyzed the educational system based on the construction of individuals' educational identities (Antikainen et al., 1999: 216-219). According to Houtsonen, on the one hand, educational identity determines how an individual uses educational resources and, on the other hand, education determines the formation of an individual's educational identity. The author noticed two ways in which educational identities are constructed. In the first, an individual chooses his/her education or career path based on a pattern already determined by the cultural group. In such a scenario, which resembles theories of social reproduction, "the educational sector and level chosen by the individual, including typical identities related to them, seem to be a natural continuation of his or her life thus far" (Antikainen et al., 1999: 217). According to Houtsonen, such a situation does not involve much reflection on personal identity or life in general. In the opposing scenario, an individual, usually an adult, is forced to reconsider his/her life and make educational decisions based on this process. S/he is reacting to an "inner challenge" or an "external necessity" that s/he may be experiencing, such as the need to find employment, and uses education for these ends.

5. OUR THEORETICAL ORIENTATION: ARTICULATION OF MICRO AND MACRO

In our opinion, these two approaches are situated in the extremes of the continuum of analytic usage of biographical analysis. On one hand, we are faced with an approach that constitutes an adult education tool, and on the other, we have a research tool. However, each of these approaches in itself seems to be limited as a research tool for this project given our research question and objectives. The first one poses a problem relating to the nature of knowledge produced. As a reflective (read therapeutic) tool, a lot of importance is placed especially on exploring biographical coherence, which could leave the incoherencies and the contradictions in the shadows and hence introduce a certain analytical bias. This work produces knowledge for its author but it is not sufficient for scientific knowledge. The second approach is a research approach. It underlines the intergenerational evolution of meaning of learning but does not say anything about personal destinies and the dynamics between social positioning, participation in adult learning and its course.

Our objective is to understand the amalgamation between participation in informal or formal activities of learning and the life course with a dual recognition that participation can lead to bifurcations of life course and on the other hand, biographical transitions can also induce a demand for learning. This articulation becomes visible especially in a society where the relationship between work and jobs changes potentially leading to modifications in the learning field.

The data collected does not aspire to comprehend the entirety of individual biographies as in the case of life history. We are interested in the recent transitions that could have had an influence on the participation in activities of formal and informal learning. We have identified four such transitions for the purpose of this research:

- ◆ Professional transitions, be it in terms of job (entry in or exit from labour market), in terms of work itself (promotion, change of responsibilities, change of enterprise) or in terms of the structure and know how related to work (organizational changes, technological changes, etc.);
- ◆ Personal or family related transition;
- ◆ Geographical displacement (moving or immigration) ;
- ◆ Changes in health.

The moments of transition are particularly interesting to the study as they challenge – potentially at least – the identity question. These transitions are selected from the moments of bifurcations in the course of an individual's life¹¹. Some among them are socially organized or institutionalized such as entry into school, passage from primary to secondary, entry into the labour market or the retirement. Others are less so such as entry into adult life. Some transitions are more significant than others from individual point of view. They represent crucial moments that not only orient the events that follow but also question social identity (Atikainen et Komonen, 2003).

This focus on transition creates room to avoid criticism that Bourdieu gave on biographical approaches that rest on the presumption of biographical analysis is founded on the continuity of meaning of individual existence (life in its totality or an *ensemble* of coherence and

¹¹ Use of the notion of life course rather than trajectory is important. The notion of trajectory, that comes from the ballistic, refers to a course where the origin as well as the target are known. The concept of life course leaves the space to manoeuvre in the proceedings of individual biographies.

orientation). The question is not of 'forcing' the respondents to construct coherence of identity or to produce a linear career but to construct significance of personal or professional changes, in their eyes and their possible links with learning. The interviews look into capturing the significance of transition(s) for the individual that could be related in very diverse ways, which, in itself constitutes material for analysis.

Moreover, it is also important to study the objective and subjective dimensions of the transitions with forms of social integration of individuals; a condition necessary to articulate individual life course with the structure of social positioning.

Our research questions relating to professional transition are:

- ◆ How the changes in working conditions in the enterprises affect the work situation of individuals, access to resources and significance of learning?
- ◆ How do individuals react to these changes and how do they modify the meaning of learning?
- ◆ What is the significance of formal and informal learning in the work context?
- ◆ How do the acquired and inherited social and cultural dispositions influence the perceptions and attitude towards learning and education?
- ◆ What is individual evaluation of different modes of learning?

Our research questions relating to personal transitions are:

- ◆ How do major changes in lifestyle influence the access to educational resources?
- ◆ How do individuals react to these changes and how do they modify the meaning of learning?
- ◆ How do the acquired and inherited social and cultural dispositions influence the perceptions and attitude towards learning and education?
- ◆ What is individual evaluation of different modes of learning?
- ◆ What kind of lifestyle changes are introduced by the learning (educational activity)?

The research project also explores the significance that the learning takes for an individual. The objective is to better understand the answers to the survey. The individuals in the survey have responded to the questions of formal and informal learning activities. By referring to these responses, the interviews give an opportunity to the individuals to provide in-depth information on the nature of the activity or the learning and on its relationship to their personal or professional life. This information will allow better understanding of the significance of learning in an informal context, which could advance the discussion on the nature of informal learning.

6. Methodological considerations

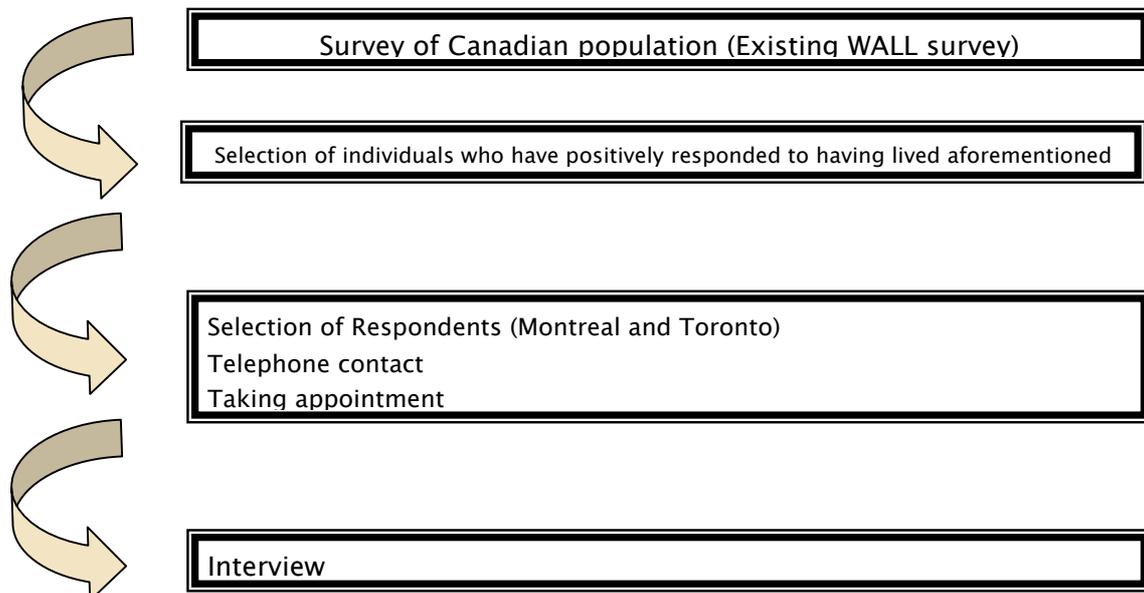
We can study informal learning and participation in organised adult education as well as their relation to work in different ways. The quantitative analysis addresses issues such as rate of participation, nature of activity and identifies significant factors that modulate participation. Because this kind of analysis is less efficient to deal with the meaning of social action (as participation in learning activities), consideration of the changes in work and the workplace and studying life context, the general survey will be complimented with qualitative biographical analysis. In other words, the use of different methods introduces a change in the scale of observation and lead to production of different kind of knowledge (Lahire, 1996,

1998 et 2002).

Our approach focuses on critical incidences as heuristic moments to capture the way people, under changing living and working conditions, use learning resources to go through a transition in a more or less autonomous way. In order to document relationship with changing working conditions, learning activities (formal and informal) and biography of an individual, we will select 96 respondents of the general survey based on the following criteria.

- ♦ Indication of significant transition in the last five years with regards to professional life, personal life relating to health situation, displacement and family;
- ♦ Residence in two areas, Great Toronto and Great Montreal areas, known for their specific regime of industrial relations and their different cultural context;
- ♦ Gender, taking into account the gender difference in working life condition and in domestic division of labour;
- ♦ Initial education level and socio-occupational situation (considering the impact of social position on the working conditions, on mobility and on accessibility to educational resources).

PHASES OF THE RESEARCH



In general, we will follow methodological indications of life histories approach (Pineau, 1989) and retrospective event histories (Glick and al, 1995). Two methodological tools have been retained to capture both the objective biographical events and the subjective meanings of social action:

- ♦ WALL national survey provides some information about social situation, domestic life, major life transitions, participation in formal and informal adult education

- activities;
- ◆ Semi-structured interviews to complete the survey information and capture the meanings given by the subject to the way he/she has coped with the last transition, as well as to his/her learning history, work and employment biography, family history, current evolving work conditions, previous work-related transition points and life-long and life-wide accessibility to learning resources.

The topics of interview:

- Characteristics of the actual working transition period
 - Nature of change and circumstances of learning activity;
 - The ways the enterprise and employees cope with change;
 - Characteristics of learning activities (formal and informal) relative to the transition;
 - Impression about and assessment of the approach to change/transition;
 - Link with learning activity.
- Educational biographical background
 - Initial education;
 - Opinions and attitudes about school, schooling, education, etc.;
 - Subjective relevancy of the subsequent learning events;
 - Sequence of organized sequence adult education events;
 - Involvement in informal learning activities;
 - Meaning of informal learning activities;
 - Representation of absence or presence of complementarity between formal and informal learning;
- Occupational path
 - Professional careers;
- Previous transition period
 - Nature of transition;
 - Mode of management of transition;
 - Importance of learning activities in the transition;
- Participation in and meaning given to formal activity of adult education ;
- Participation in and meaning given to informal learning.

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