

Contributions to the debate on the study of identities and biographies

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This paper seeks to contribute to the enhancement of the discussion about the study of subjects as individual entities. To address the complexity that this analytical look at social processes entails we will reflect on the circumstances that have an impact on the resurgence of the interest in individual stories. In doing this we aim to contextualize part of the scenario that gives rise to this renewed focus on learning about the lives of common people.

Accordingly, since we believe that a change in the way of looking at something also calls for the use of means of understanding attuned to the levels of reality we seek to scrutinize, we include the methodological implications that accompany the development of these perspectives of analysis. In this shift towards the particular, we find disciplines that examine subjects from the standpoint of everyday life such as ethnography, ethnology, and approaches whose object of knowledge is the individual's life trajectory, among which we locate both the biographical method and its links to studies in social identity. We end our presentation with a discussion of some ideas put forth by biography scholars to address the analysis of particular subjects.

The move towards the individual

In doing a brief review on the genesis of social thought in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, we can see the prevalence of the great paradigms – great metanarratives, as postmodernists called them – and the emergence of schools of thought that gave some freshness and renewal to social sciences. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the theoretical premises of structural-functionalism and structuralist Marxism were very influential; different disciplines were dominated by schemata that viewed the development and configuration of individuals as a consequence of their interaction with social and economic materiality. In studies about different social issues, we see that subjects are conceived of as beings shaped by econo-

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mic, cultural and social structures, without any degree of freedom to negotiate other options for their development.

The prevalence of these theoretical pillars was eroded by the cognitive requirements brought about by the development of dependent capitalist societies. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the gestation of processes that began to modify social life and endow it with a complexity that was no longer easily apprehensible through such referents. Problems such as the student movements in 1968, a number of urban demands, the emergence of feminism, the high rates of elementary school dropout, the small number of young people who had access to higher education, the appearance of urban guerrillas, among others, put the explanatory power of conventional paradigm to the test.

As some authors argue, these challenges show the theoretical limitations of both structural-functionalism and Marxism to apprehend singularity (*cf.* Depaepe and Fran, 2005). In the analytical approach to these phenomena, their basic input became an epistemological obstacle to understand the individual: their explanation of new social expressions was obstructed by the prevalence of visions that conceived subjects as groupings with common elements, whose life tended inexorably to uniformity. In such theoretical matrices the subject appears as a structured being without the possibility of reacting to the onslaughts of the social environment.

These paradigms and their followers in the realm of social science have experienced an undeniable loss of legitimacy, a retreat that has allowed disciplines like cultural anthropology, ethnography, history and psychology, which had remained almost in the shade of those meta-narratives, to re-emerge. From these disciplines a critical dialog has been established whose interlocutors ask the great theories: What in those theoretical approaches hinders the apprehension of the particular/individual? How can we overcome their cognitive limitations? How can we visualize subjects in their particular essence? Can the subjects be understood only through their individuality?

This dialog takes place through relatively different lines. On the one hand, we see a greater interplay of cultural anthropology, ethnography and psychology, disciplines that offer more profound and relevant insights to learn about human individuality, to understand how institutions penetrate that individuality, and how individuals negotiate with the influence of their environment.

In the field of history we also find approaches that take us away from the history of great events and leading figures, and closer to previously invisible issues such as the situation of women, children, the elderly and the "abnormal". Social history highlights the historicity of several passages of the evolution of mankind, and cultural history offers us access to the heart of institutions, to the subjects that give them life and meaning (*cf.* Viñao Frago, 2008). These approaches open the door both to the knowledge of common people and to the structures that shape them, without leaving out the individual's capability of negotiation.

In the realm of sociology, we see the gestation of a heated debate around the relationship between the “macro” and the “micro”. In this controversy we may glimpse a bifurcation of approaches: some sociological traditions underscore the prevalence of one level over the other, while other schools of thought seek to integrate micro-sociological and macro-sociological theories in order to overcome the polarization of their positions and generate, in turn, analytic approaches more capable of explaining the changing link between the system and the individuals (*cf.* Salles, 2003).

In this framework of discussion there is a questioning of determinist schemata that bring with them not only the emergence of new theoretical approaches, but also the creation of methodological options that allow us to apprehend the different levels of reality alluded to in them.

New views and new ways to apprehend reality

Understanding the social issues that have come up since the late 1960s and the following decades requires creating new theoretical referents to understand how and why subjects began to contradict conventional behavior patterns. Neither Marxism nor structural-functionalism were able to explain student protests, the women’s movement, the presence of inequalities in different educational levels and the heterogeneity of cultural stereotypes around social identities. At the level of the intellection of the individual, of the contents that subjects absorb from their links with the environment that surrounds them, there are theoretical endeavors that seek to explain the various relationships between the individual and the system.

Together with these theoretical endeavors, there appeared different requirements to apprehend social reality. On the methodological level, we see how the new looks at the singular, the individuals’ subjectivity, cultural materiality and the everyday activities of the subjects demand the use of options that allow us to capture the expressions that constitute their empirical evidence. It is not anymore about the social facts that positivism underscored but about realities that show different makeups in which uniformity is not their distinctive feature, about the significance they have for the entities and the context in which they are produced. Scholars in different disciplines have begun to rescue and rehabilitate research techniques and sources that help to retrieve the individual experiences of the subjects and help to reconstruct collective processes through the particular.

In the field of history, scholars wondered if it was sufficient to start from new theoretical questions to extract adequate information from written archives in order to reconstruct the life trajectory of the subjects. In this discussion they saw that the relationship with the sources implied formulating new related questions, both about the structure that supported the document as well as about those required to guide and make explicit the analytic approach. In the search to historicize the individual, documentary archives turned out to be insufficient, which

led to the need – following the ethnographic experience – to document the undocumented through in-depth interviews. The challenges of historical construction imply, since then, to relate the individual with the social, remembrance with memory, with documentary evidence, which was broadened to include photographs, videos, blueprints, diaries, books, notebooks, collections and, of courses, documents in public and private archives.

Also in sociology there was intense debate around the relationship between the particular and the social, a debate which has been especially fruitful when thinking about the link between the individual and the identities as a construction permeated by the underlying historicity of the subjects who participate in the social exchange. To situate the progress made in this discipline, we will briefly review the classical referents that laid the groundwork to explain the shaping of the subjects that make up capitalist society.

We may argue that, since the early twentieth century, with Émile Durkheim's theoretical argument (1996) about the duality of human nature and Talcott Parsons's contributions on the structure of social action, a view of the social being that considers his constitution through the material and cultural constraint exerted by the structures established in each historical moment took root. Thus, realms such as the family, the community and the school are viewed as places that have a determining influence on the individuals' actions, regardless of their personal awareness or wishes.

These theoretical views were accompanied by a school of thought that expressed visible discrepancies on the historical mandate exerted by the structures of domination on the individuals' makeup. This approach, born in the 1970s, helped to highlight the asymmetrical features of capitalist society. Its followers, unlike Durkheim and Parsons, did not view the formation of new generations as a process for the integration of the individual to the social order established but as a mechanism that not only technically and culturally produces individuals, but also reproduces in them the views of the ruling class.

This approach was called the Theory of Reproduction. Its followers, despite not going past a deterministic view of the structure around the constitution of social identities, unveiled before academic communities and different national societies the effect of socio-economic inequality on the appropriation of cultural assets.¹

In spite of their differences, these approaches began to face strong challenges, both from academic communities and from social institutions and groups, due to their growing inabili-

¹ It must be pointed out that out of this approach grew other ways of thinking that helped to learn about the cultural diversity built from the school. Thus, by the 1980s there was research work in which the formation of the social being would no longer be viewed unidimensionally. In the work produced by the theories of conflict there was "the idea that the socialization that takes place in school spaces must be understood as the result of an ideological struggle, since educational processes in fact occur as an everyday sociocultural confrontation of teachers' and students' viewpoints, thus building a worldview every day." (Giroux, 1985, quoted by Torres, 2010: 26-27). These ideas would be adopted by the new sociology of education in the concept of resistance.

ty to explain the new social expressions that emerged in and after the 1960s. In that decade there were different and complex student demonstrations, as well as new social identities and more frequent challenges to communitarian structures, which could no longer be explained by categories such as integration, social position, role, or social class. In this dynamics, the prevailing deterministic view of the relationship between society and the individual lost ground and conditions were ripe to reflect on that link through new tools that accounted for the changes emerging in social reality.

In this context, several approaches close to methodological individualism such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology animated theoretical discussion around the configuration of social identities. These approaches viewed the subject's action as a basic principle to erect and shape his way of being and thinking and emerged – especially symbolic interactionism – as an alternative to understand the social expressions and behaviors that the structural-functionalist paradigm could not elucidate.

Like Durkheim and Parsons, interactionists use the concept of socialization to make explicit the social interweaving that surrounds the biographical trajectory of the individual from the cradle to the grave. However, unlike the main exponents of structural-functionalism, socialization is not viewed as an event in which the actor only receives information, but as a dynamic process in which the actor gives shape and adapts the information according to his or her own needs.

Critics point out that this approach gives little importance to social structures, that it minimizes the impact of the instituted world, and that it focuses excessively on individual psycho-social processes. In spite of such criticism, symbolic interactionism offers valuable contributions to understand the construction of social identity and, in this sense, the biographical configuration of individuals. Its assumptions allow us to visualize with better bases how the subjects take on different social roles. For instance, the constitution process of the *social self* through its relationship with other signifiers and other generalized ones, and the capacity for reflection acquired by individuals to define the course of their future action, are ideas that contribute to enrich the approach to biographical trajectory of different social groups.

In this weakening of conventional paradigms the development of new approaches that increase the knowledge of the link between the structures and the subjects' action has been fostered. Thus, supported by the notion of identity² and the rediscovery of the contributions of

² Claude Dubar argues that the central role acquired by the concept of identity in European social science since the late 1970s is due to the diminishment in importance of Marxism and the use of the concept of social class as an explanatory element in Western sociology, to the identity oriented to collective resistance to financial globalization, economic mundialization and political liberalism, and to the decline of the project of modernity and its promises, especially the idea of progress (Valenzuela, 2010.: 13-14).

the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber³ and Norbert Elias,⁴ scholars from different disciplines have conducted studies that enhance our understanding of the articulation between the objective and the subjective in social life. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century people like Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Manuel Castell, Alan Touraine and a cohort of French sociologists undertook arduous theoretical work that provided more promising ways of explaining to understand the shaping of identity expressions, individuation processes and biographical configuration of the subjects.⁵

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the thinkers who managed to rid themselves of the weight of structures and move on to new theoretical insights that allowed him to reflect on the dynamic relationships between the structures and the subjects. In the mid-1980s, his work moved relatively away from the reproductionist stage and offered elements that helped to underpin his constructivist approach.⁶

In his book *La reproduction* (1981), Bourdieu pointed out that every pedagogical action (AP) required enough time of exposure to impose and inculcate a cultural arbitrariness (pedagogical work), a feature that allowed him to differentiate pedagogical action from discontinuous and unusual symbolic violence actions, as could be all occasional social encounters. This lasting formation, generated in individuals through exposure to a pedagogical action, also known as *habitus*, tends to act in them as a principle that generates practices that reproduce objective structures. This idea is part of the deterministic view adopted initially by Bourdieu about the function of the school: in school, lasting dispositions are formed that tend to reproduce practices, beliefs and behaviors compatible with the interests of the ruling class. At the time the dispositions acquired were conceived as ideas that structured the individual, without the individual being able to react subjectively to them.⁷

Later, Bourdieu would leave behind this passive definition of the concept *habitus* to conceive it as a dynamic articulation in which the subject not only assimilates what the social structure

3 Claude Dubar built his theoretical approach to identity on the different historical processes discussed by Norbert Elias, Max Weber and Karl Marx. From these authors he recovers the typologies of identity that appear in the evolution of identification and social ascription processes (Dubar, 2002: 22-70).

4 In *The Civilizing Process*, Norbert Elias analyzes the evolution of European societies from the Middle Ages to the project of modernity. His detailed historical narrative helps to locate the shift from collective forms of domination to individualized forms of identification. His findings helped develop new insights that distinguish identities associated to us from identities linked to me, to the individual's subjectivity (Eliás, 1988).

5 Outstanding in this group is also Gilberto Giménez, one of the precursors of the field of social identity in Mexico. His insights are frequent referents in essays and graduate degree theses about that issue.

6 In *Choses dites*, Bourdieu points out that "the blind luck of translation has made, for instance, *La reproduction* better known, which will lead [...] to classify me as a structuralist, while older works have been ignored [...] that would without a doubt lead some to perceive me [as a] 'constructivist' [...]" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 127).

7 Despite this deterministic view of the function of the school, Bourdieu helps to make clear that the school is not a homogeneous entity but a system where subjects with different cultural capital meet, which has an impact on the different appropriation of the assets provided by the school.

provides but also reacts as a structuring entity of his or her environment through the knowledge previously acquired. According to this rationale the *habitus* acquires the heuristic capability to explain how social structures are engraved on the mind and the body as a system of lasting dispositions, and how each individual reproduces those structures differently. Thus, although the structures continue shaping the individuals' social action social, they are no longer passive beings but subjects who acquire the capacity to interact with those structures, based on the significances they have previously assimilated.

Within the field of French sociology there are other outstanding thinkers such as Vincent de Gaulejac, Francois Dubet and Claude Dubar, who have made more promising contributions to the study of social links and collective action (*cf.* Guadarrama and Torres, 2007). Vincent de Gaulejac (2002), for instance, points out the importance of articulating the contributions of psychology and sociology to understand the construction of human behavior. This author specifies that identity cannot be reduced to a single condition, whether individual or social, since the subject's desire to be is founded on symbolic expressions and is inscribed in the quotidian nature of social relationships (objectivation), within a dialectic process between the socially structuring and the individual's subjectivity. Therefore, individual existence is constructed in a dynamic relationship between the "individual produced", a product of social structures, and the "individual producer" of an identity that is his own.

This dialectic process, according to Gaulejac, is limited by a diachronic and a synchronic perspective: diachronic, as a historical process that includes the analysis of a socio-cultural heritage, and the social and family backgrounds as conditionings of individual destinies, where subjects are constructed based on history and to a certain extent against it, to finally construct themselves; synchronic, because at a specific point in time it conceives the individual as a product of his or her concrete conditions of existence, which means that he is predisposed to function in a way according to the objective and subjective possibilities provided by those conditions.

Francois Dubet, in turn, believes that the classical view of identity does not allow us to understand the new social realities that appeared with modernity.⁸ He argues that modern society generates another way to see identity, a view of the actor in which the principle to define oneself is less an integration and more a strategic capability. This kind of identity is no longer defined only by the internalization of rules and norms, but also by "the strategic capability to achieve certain goals, which allows it to become a resource for action" (Dubet, 1989: 526).

He considers identity as "another level of action that appears when societies are no longer entirely dominated by their reproduction, after they possess relatively open institutional and

⁸ Dubet argues that in the classical view of identity "society is seen as an integration system, an organization of status and roles oriented towards collective values; social action is the adequate realization of this integration. In this representation, of which Durkheim and the functionalists provided the most definite image, the actor is constructed by socialization and internalization of the stable elements of this system" (Dubet, 1989: 525).

economic systems; the principle of action is no longer belonging, so the meaning of strategy and identity changes." (Dubet, 1989: 526) In this definition, the actor appears with greater possibilities to manipulate the shaping of his identity, and therefore to move from an identity for the others to a definition of himself. This theoretical specification allows us to distinguish analytically the concept of identity from the notion of socialization used by sociologists like Durkheim and Parsons: whereas in the former definition the individual is given a more active role, in the latter his role is restricted to the internalization of collective values. This insight allows us to delimit two levels of analysis with specific contents that coexist in the shaping of the actor's identity. These two levels, furthermore, "are inscribed in two distinct action rationales, two kinds of particular social relationships that inform the contents of that identity and confer distinct meanings and functions to it" (Dubet, 1989: 530).

There is a third level of social identity that is defined by its convictions, its commitments and direct identification with the central cultural principles of a society. "This level of action is the one Touraine designates with the concept of historical action; that is, the values, principles and social relationships through which a society produces its historicity and represents itself as capable of acting on itself." (Dubet, 1989: 530). This level of identification is characterized by the development of a social-historical commitment associated to cultural orientations and to the projects that enable a society to define its interests and overcome them. Classical examples of this kind of identity are expressed in patriotic movements, the working class struggles or the struggles for democracy.

Once the levels of identity have been defined, Dubet underscores that neither the social actors nor their society are constructed around a single principle.⁹ He argues that "social identity is not given nor is it unidimensional, but results of the work of an actor who administrates and organizes the different dimensions of his social experience and identifications" (Dubet, 1989: 536). This definition of social identity as self-production, as work on oneself supported by given categories and relationships, refers to the notion of *subject*, since – Dubet argues – "this work can [not] be done without a 'worker'." Within this way of self-production of identity is the idea of a subject permeated by the culture of each epoch: "every culture proposes a definition of human nature, an ethos through which the actors' experience is ordered and their subjectivity is constituted."¹⁰ In this view of the subject, historicity is no longer experienced as a faraway realm, as transcendental paradigms that project their future, but as a culture that is internalized in the subjectivity of the subject, who knows that society produces itself in its own capacity of cultural creation and exchange.

9 Following Weber, Dubet believes that "social identity is a complex and contradictory process because the actor constructs himself in several levels of the practice, each one of which has its own logic and refers to specific types of social relationships" (Dubet, 1989: 534).

10 For example, "traditional societies determined their conception of the subject at the level of social organization, of integration and of fusion in the group, in the code of honor. The Classical age constructed the actor who does not become a full subject but through reason and his exercise in the public space and the institutions where free and rational subjects face each other." (Dubet, 1989: 541).

Claude Dubar, in turn, suggests that social identity is the result of a double transaction between the subject's objective and subjective worlds: "of the subject with himself (subjective real identity) and the subject with the others (objective virtual identity), and in turn of the identities inherited, accepted or rejected by the individual and the identities aspired to, in continuity or breaking with preceding identities." (Dubar, 1991, quoted by Guadarrama, 2007: 44-45). Dubar underscores that identity is a complex communicative process that is constructed out of the individuals, not in an isolated or static fashion but in socially and historically structured contexts. It is in these contexts where individuals perceive themselves as subjects of a culture and where they occasionally become collective actors. In this rationale, he sees collectivities as a "consequence of symbolic processes, significant distinctions built by the individuals themselves in situated environments such as the family, the school, the neighborhood and the labor market" (*ibid*).

The resurgence of biography

Along with the debates about the historical shaping of identities and their framing within the complex relationships between the individual and the social, there has been a "return" to biography, no longer as an intellectual activity that seeks to figure out the "exemplary" life of an individual or to produce a narrative to be used for moral teaching but as a theoretical positioning that seeks to understand the complex relationship between subject and society, between the individual and the social structure, a process that is starting to be supplemented by new methods and strategies. How can those relationships be known? What kind of sources would have to be built or sought to retrieve the voice of the persons? The road to find answers to these questions was not easy; it required an exchange between social disciplines and the development of experience, in which trial and error were part of the scholars' learning.

The idea of making marginal groups visible owes much to the approaches to gender and to the Anglo-Saxon feminists. The work of Joan W. Scott and Nancy Fraser in the United States, to mention but a few representatives of this intellectual movement, opened the way for researchers to consider not only the invisibility of women but also that of other social groups marginalized from social research, among which teachers have in recent years become an object of study that has attracted the attention of historians in Latin America.¹¹

Although the central focus of biography is on the way in which an individual shapes and gives meaning to his life, the new approaches require considering the context that sets limits and possibilities to the individual's construction; that is, the social must be read through the

¹¹ By way of example we may cite the following texts with a biographical approach: *Las maestras de México*, Vol. 1 and 2, published by Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones de México in 2015 and 2016, and the publications of María Teresa Fernández Aceves in 2006 and 2014: "La cultura cívica y de género de dos maestras de Guadalajara, 1920-1980", in *Sinéctica* 28, and "Atala Apodaca Anaya (1884-1977): Anticlericalismo, educación cívica, fuerzas progresistas y la Revolución Mexicana", in *Mujeres en el cambio social en el siglo XX mexicano*, edited by María Teresa Fernández Aceves, Mexico: CIESAS/Siglo XXI Editores.

individual and experience must be at the center of the inquiry, not just as an isolated event but as a referent of the sequences experienced by the individual, the dialog between the individual and his environment, and the ruptures and flexions that appear in his trajectory (Rojas, 2013). Thus the importance of highlighting the interweaving between the macro and the micro, the objective and the subjective, the structured/instituted and the subject's capacity for agency.¹² Such intellection processes are necessary to answer questions related to the construction of the dynamics of individuation and elucidate the gears that support the identity and the biography of an individual (Reséndiz, 2013). These topics and issues are tied to the reflection on the role of narrative in the construction and deconstruction of historical discourses.

Reflection about the relationship between history and narrative is especially relevant in biographical research. Hayden White's and Paul Ricoeur's approaches led researchers to question the production of historical discourse. Although arguments about the "fictionality" of history and its proximity to literary discourse caused considerable distress among the community of historians, a later – more careful and thorough – reading led to more comprehensive considerations. For White (2003), the coherence of the historical account comes from the historian and not from the event, which depends on the social position of the person who produces the historical narrative and includes the theoretical and methodological props, and on what is considered relevant at a given moment by scholars. Ricoeur emphasizes the meaning of historical discourse; for him, the particularity of the historical account is that it structures, communicates and interrelates events by interlinking incidents, scales, spaces and times. Therefore, in biography the account allows for the apprehension and enables the signification of the experience, an experience that is constitutive of individual and collective history and identity, and that only narrative makes intelligible and thus understandable.

In the biographical method, narrative stands on two lines. The first one alludes to the way in which the individual, when he is interviewed, "tells" his history. Evoking involves bringing to the present what happened in the past. The interviewer's task is to stimulate memory and ask about those aspects that interest him, which must be linked to the research purposes, questions, and theoretical approach. The second line of the narrative is in the plot that the researcher produces to communicate his findings and explanations. In either of the two narratives there is an intertwining of texts: on the side of the subject of the biography, in his voice, and his memory, there are voices and memories of what he shared and experienced with others in specific spaces like the family, the school, work; on the text of the historian is the individual and social rationale of the subject interviewed, against the background of the comprehensive and explanatory rationales that the researcher constructs by articulating these discourses with the contents of other documents. This operation of intellection allows us to put the individual history in perspective.

¹² Para una revisión desde distintos enfoque y experiencias de investigación en torno al método biográfico y su basamento teórico y metodológico puede consultarse Milada Bazant (Coord.) (2013). "Biografía". *Métodos, metodologías y enfoques*. México: El Colegio Mexiquense.

In this dynamic, we see how the interview was consolidated as a technique and a strategy for biographical research, which had been cultivated by sociologists and anthropologists as a way to capture the culture or the social representations of the groups being studied. This dynamic led to the gestation of oral archives,¹³ which contained interviews with people who at the time were considered “outstanding” in local or national realms and made significant contributions to fields such as medicine, jurisprudence, education or politics throughout the twentieth century. As biography developed as a specific methodology, there was also a development in qualitative methodologies, which led to underscoring the importance of the triangulation of sources to arrive at the comprehension of the complex links between individuals and the social structure.

By way of conclusion

How is the structured translated into individual and microsocial thoughts and behaviors? What is the individual’s room for maneuver vis-à-vis the structures? When thinking about how the individual dialogs, resists, negotiates, appropriates or submits to the social world, we ask ourselves: is it an exercise in reflection assembled from the present, or in the link between past and present? How does biography relate to the construction of identities and the individual’s capacity for agency? How can we deal with the challenges of undertaking the deconstruction of narratives, both for the researcher and the subject of the biography? These are some of the questions underlying biographical research, and it would be advisable to continue analyzing them.

The field of knowledge of the social and cultural history of education was permeated by all these debates and theoretical-methodological contributions. The theoretical and methodological contributions of history, sociology, anthropology and social psychology, in particular, allowed scholars to challenge the views from the present and place the subjects spatially and temporally in specific institutional frameworks, in search of knowledge about the relationship between their context and their capacity for agency. Based on this principle, the ambivalent relationship between an education that strives for homogenization and the expressions of conflict, resistance or rearrangement in the face of such imposition is now acknowledged. This field seeks to disclose the complex interweaving between the institutional, the material and the ways in which groups and individuals think. Thus the interest in analyzing rhythms and spaces, the changes and continuities of educational processes, the material and symbolic structures generated or tensed by the folding of scales and contexts as well as the production, transmission, circulation and appropriation of knowledge, all of these topics and issues in which biography has shown its heuristic potential.

13 As an example, the Dr. José María Luis Mora Research Institute houses an Archive of the Word (Archivo de la Palabra) containing 500 interviews.

In this rationale, biography and the research on identities become rich roads to access an understanding of the traces of the past and to compensate for a memory situated in the interweaving between the individual and the collective. In this framework, teachers, scholars and students constitute key social groups to inquire what happens in the juncture between public policies, educational models, the production, transmission, circulation and appropriation of pedagogical ideas and school knowledge, and to consider the diverse contexts in which educational work takes place.

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