

## **Autobiographical Narratives and Research on the Constitution of Subjectivity in the Vygotskian Perspective**

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**Abstract:** Research on the constitution of subjectivity continues to be a relevant topic for Psychology. This study aimed to analyze the relevance of exploring autobiographical narratives as a methodological resource for understanding this process. Anchored in the premises of historical-cultural psychology in dialogue with other theoretical perspectives, the defended thesis is that, through this theoretical-methodological alternative, it is possible to investigate the different interrelated domains in the processes of constitution of subjectivities, such as the works of memory, language and the dynamic character that they establish with historical and cultural circumstances. The text comprises four parts: the first explores the challenges involved in researching subjectivity; the second, the contributions of Vygotskian psychology to the understanding of the phenomenon; the third, the fecundity of narratives as methodological resources for the study of subjectivation processes. In the last topic, considerations are made about some results of research carried out from school memories.

**Keywords:** historic-cultural psychology, Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, 1896-1934, subjectivity, autobiography, memory

### **Narrativas Autobiográficas e a Pesquisa da Constituição da Subjetividade na Perspectiva Vigostkiana**

**Resumo:** A pesquisa sobre a constituição da subjetividade continua sendo um tema relevante para a Psicologia. Este estudo objetivou analisar a pertinência da exploração das narrativas autobiográficas como recurso metodológico para a compreensão de tal processo. A tese defendida, ancorada nas premissas da psicologia histórico-cultural em diálogo com outras perspectivas teóricas, é que, por meio dessa alternativa teórico-metodológica, é possível investigar os diferentes domínios inter-relacionados nos processos de constituição das subjetividades, como os trabalhos da memória, da linguagem e o caráter dinâmico que estabelecem com as circunstâncias históricas e culturais. Quatro partes compõem o texto: a primeira explora os desafios envolvidos na pesquisa sobre a subjetividade; a segunda, as contribuições da psicologia vygotskiana para a compreensão do fenômeno; a terceira, a fecundidade das narrativas como recursos metodológicos para o estudo dos processos de subjetivação; no último tópico, são feitas considerações sobre alguns resultados de pesquisas realizadas a partir das memórias escolares.

**Palavras-chave:** psicologia histórico-cultural, Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, 1896-1934, subjetividade, autobiografia, memória

### **Narrativas Autobiográficas y la Investigación sobre la Constitución de la Subjetividad en la Perspectiva Vygostkiana**

**Resumen:** La investigación sobre la constitución de la subjetividad continúa siendo un tema relevante para la Psicología. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar la pertinencia de explorar las narrativas autobiográficas como recurso metodológico para la comprensión de este proceso. La tesis defendida, anclada en los presupuestos de la psicología histórico-cultural en diálogo con otras perspectivas teóricas, es que, a través de esta alternativa teórico-metodológica, es posible investigar los diferentes dominios interrelacionados en los procesos de constitución de las subjetividades, como el obras de memoria, lenguaje y el carácter dinámico que establecen con las circunstancias históricas y culturales. Cuatro partes componen el texto: la primera explora los desafíos que implica investigar la subjetividad; el segundo, los aportes de la psicología vygotskiana a la comprensión del fenómeno; el tercero, la fecundidad de las narrativas como recursos metodológicos para el estudio de los procesos de subjetivación; en el último tema, se hacen consideraciones sobre algunos resultados de investigaciones realizadas a partir de las memorias escolares.

**Palabras clave:** psicología histórico-cultural, Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, 1896-1934, subjetividad, autobiografía, memoria

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Many challenges exist in the study of the relationships between individual experiences and collective phenomena and, above all, the dynamics established between singular and plural in the constitution of subjectivities. The subject, widely explored

in human and social sciences, can be approached from different angles, fields of knowledge, and theoretical references, which requires an interdisciplinary approach. For this article, a specific part of this broad topic will be addressed, based on Psychology issues in its interfaces with Education.

The effort will be to discuss formulations drafted in the initial decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Belarusian Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, one of the precursors of the so-called Cultural-Historical Psychology, (which, by the way, he often practiced) and other authors (classic and contemporary names) from different areas to analyze new perspectives that contribute to research on individual configurations and, at the same time, the educational field.

The choice of this theoretical framework is based on two assumptions: how contemporary his postulates are and the pertinence of his theoretical and methodological ideas, a topic of great importance in the author's work that deserves to be further explored.

According to the perspective suggested by Vygotsky, this theoretical study aimed to analyze the relevance of exploring autobiographical narratives as a research source for the study of the constitution of subjectivities. Anchored in the premises of historical-cultural psychology in dialogue with other theoretical perspectives, the defended thesis is that, through this theoretical-methodological alternative, it is possible to investigate the different interrelated domains in the processes of constitution of subjectivities, such as the works of memory, language and the dynamic character that they establish with historical and cultural circumstances (Rego, Aquino, & Oliveira, 2006).

Finally, as an example of the fruitfulness of adopting autobiographical narratives as a valid methodological procedure to study the constitution of subjectivity, we will discuss some results from studies based on school memories. They point to important educational implications, taking elements to the analyses of school practices, the understanding of the effects of school on the lives of subjects, the comprehension of how the schooling process is a part of the constitution of subjectivities and to overcome specific visions and beliefs firmly rooted in educational ideas.

Although Vygotsky's body of work has no explicit mention to the word 'subjectivity' (the terminology one finds in his writings is 'personality'), we understand, as do other contemporary scholars, that the author's cultural-historical psychology – even if unfinished due to his premature death and developed almost a century ago – still provides us with crucial elements and guidance to study this phenomenon nowadays (Delari Junior, 2013; González Rey, 2009; González Rey & Goulart 2019; Maheirie, 2002; Molon, 2010; Smolka, 2021; Zanella, 2004). Vygotsky's great challenge was to create, based on historical and dialectical materialism, methodological tools and resources that would enable the development of a general theory of human development by considering the historical, cultural, and individual dimensions. The author's propositions and empirical research (some conducted by his collaborators) help us understand what is at stake in the process of becoming human,

reflect on the historical development of consciousness and, above all, how each person is constituted. Such theses are fruitful as they provide relevant explanations about the social nature of psychic functioning, social and cultural constitution of individuals, and the conditions and possibilities of a subject's protagonism forged on social relations (Pino Sirgado, 2000).

We understand that Vygotsky's persistent effort and interest in understanding humans as complex and whole beings, and his attitude as a researcher – extremely bold for the period's standards – remain contemporary and seem to provide a rich alternative path to face the dilemmas and problems that contemporary science is still unable to fully comprehend. As discussed by Smolka, Nogueira, Dainez, and Laplane:

Throughout his investigative work, in addressing a diversity of topics related to human conduct and consciousness, Vygotsky developed several methodological and analytical procedures. He consistently argued about the intrinsic relations between the research method and the problem under investigation, vehemently defending the need to search for an adequate method to the possible configurations of an object of study (Smolka et al., 2021, p. 1365).

It is for this reason that his propositions eventually serve also as a source of inspiration for searching methodological alternatives to study the processes of constitution of subjectivities. The perspectives opened by Vygotsky's innovative works are related, among other aspects, to the possibility of understanding the social and historical origin of human processes, of examining multiple phenomena in their complexity, the need to create research instruments and procedures capable of ensuring such understanding, as well as the active role of researchers in formulating questions and conducting empirical research (Zanella, Reis, Titon, Urnau, & Dassoler, 2007).

### **The challenges involved in researching subjectivity**

Although it is not intended to make a historical analysis of how subjectivity was approached over time, it is necessary to emphasize that concerns about the subject have a long tradition that predates the birth of Psychology as a discipline. However, in this domain of knowledge, the study of this issue has assumed a prominent place. As is known, subjectivity and the notion of the subject began to constitute fundamental concepts in philosophical thought from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, outlining, in subsequent periods, the genesis of Psychology as an autonomous science (Figueiredo, 1992).

Since its institution in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Psychology has sought to understand its complex object of study, weave considerations and establish definitions regarding the constitution of what is unique, singular, peculiar to each individual. In this long process, it proposed different explanations and methods for investigating the phenomenon. Such efforts gave rise to different psychologies configured

by distinct theoretical-methodological approaches with presuppositions, foundations, methodologies, and concepts delimited by significant borders (Massimi, 2006).

The terminology applied to designate the subject and subjectivity varies significantly, depending on the chosen approach (and even among authors who adopt the same theoretical perspective). This panorama reveals that there is no hegemonic explanation for the psychological phenomena and the processes of constitution of the subjects. As noted by Aita and Facci (2011), this also occurs among those who share Vygostkian beliefs. Therefore, it requires clarifying, from now on, which perspective will be adopted here.

Let us start from terminology. Anchored on the cultural-historical psychology approach, from a conceptual point of view, the notion of subjectivity will be used here, stripped of a naturalized and substantialized sense of immanent interiority that would make it possible to distinguish individuals from each other. It will be understood and analyzed differently from the implications and historical, social, and cultural dynamics that constitute it. Indeed, this is a contrary view to psychological conceptions pointing to an inner, intimate core and center of the “personality” or those that postulate any universality, order, regularity, and predictability in development (González Rey & Goulart, 2019).

The advocated perspective is that the dimension of subjectiveness, at the same time, constructs and is constituted by the social, which can be thematized as alterity, the dimension of the other, or relationships with the other. From this perspective, the singular is not the “opposite of the plural, but what can only exist in a constitutive relationship with the plural” (Delari Junior, 2013, p. 43). This perception stems from the assumption that human beings are not limited to their biological condition. They are historical-social subjects, permanently constituted in their dialectical interaction with the environment, *transforming and being transformed in social relations produced in a given culture*.

It is also prudent to clarify our conception of culture, as it is also a dynamic notion, subject to different interpretations. Contrarily to essentialist and immanent perceptions, and taking the studies by Certeau (1974/1995) and Chartier (1990) as a presupposition, we understand that culture does not exist outside the practices and individuals who exercise it. The representations that circulate in it, in turn, are not “disembodied.” However, they are always associated with the individuals’ experiences and the history of the group to which they belong. Culture has a structure that organizes social life, simultaneously carrying mobilities. In this way, it is not external to the social, as it creates the elements and references for collective life, individually experienced in everyday life.

From the subject’s point of view, there is space for individual freedom, as Ginzburg (2006, p. 20) analyzes: “culture offers individuals a horizon of latent possibilities – a flexible and invisible cage where the freedom allowed to each takes place” – while it provides a repertoire of ideas to decode and interpret the world, these references are constantly cut, hybridized, and recreated,

eventually transforming the culture itself. In this horizon of individual and collective exchanges, the subject is never passive, and does not “suffer” culture only, as he interacts dialectically with social dynamics, recreating himself and recreating culture. While it occurs in a symbolically mediated intersubjective process, it implies the continuous individual reconstruction of meanings and senses.

From these angles, it is possible to indicate that development and learning processes are always marked by socio-cultural circumstances that are manifest in specific historical times. There are several directions that the singular development can take since individual itineraries do not obey any specific or predetermined criteria. There is no teleological sense and no single ideal point of arrival. Therefore, it is not easy to postulate the existence of natural, universal, generalizable, or pre-established conditions. How an individual’s unique configuration contrasts with the social and historical context, with the elements of culture, peers, and family members is also unique and results from a combination of factors that includes chance and randomness. We agree with Norbert Elias when he states:

The image of man as a “closed personality” is replaced here by that of an “open personality,” which has a greater or lesser degree (but never absolute or total) of autonomy vis-à-vis other people. In reality, it is fundamentally oriented towards and dependent on other people throughout life. The web of interdependencies between human beings is what binds them together. ... Since people are more or less dependent on each other, initially through the action of nature and later through social learning, education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, we could venture to say- that they exist just as pluralities, just as configurations (Elias, 1939/1994, p. 249).

If subjectivity is constituted from alterity within always multiple and contradictory social relations, what does this imply for its research? How to do the science of subjectivity? How do subjects internalize differences (social, cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, gender, or generational)? How is the plural singularized? Since development does not follow a predictable and predetermined process, how can someone research the fragmentary and dynamic character of subjectivity and the contradictory moments of its constitution? These are the questions that guide the analyses presented here.

As mentioned previously, although the number of contemporary authors who have assumed the premises of the social constitution of psychological processes is significant, this article will discuss Vygotsky’s formulations.

### **The contributions of cultural-historical psychology**

In line with the historical and dialectical materialist framework, Vigotski (1986/2000, p. 33) understood the person as “an aggregate of social relations embodied in an individual.”

What the assertion demarcates is the inexorable relationship between the subject and society. There is only a subject because he is constituted in social-cultural contexts, resulting from the concrete action of men who collectively organize the materiality of their conditions of existence. Fighting any determinism (biological or social), he advocated the need to study the *genesis of psychological phenomena in the concrete fabric of social relations*. Above all, the individual was examined in his entirety and historicity, dialectically articulating external with internal aspects. Therefore, he considered the relationship of the singular subject with the society to which he belongs, and the historical, cultural, and semiotic mediations built along with social practices.

As a counterpoint to the essentialist and mechanistic explanations that permeated the Psychology of his time, Vygotsky tried to break away from the dichotomous and dualistic perspectives (translated into the psychic-social, biological-cultural, reason-affect, conscious-unconscious, and body-mind separation). Thus, he explained individual configurations as a unity of the diverse, a synthesis of multiple (and contradictory) determinations. He endeavored to approach subjectivity as a *process* and as an ontologically inseparable phenomenon from *intersubjectivity*, i.e., from the relationship between men and other men (Pino Sirgado, 2000).

This panorama led him to emphasize the imperative of creating research instruments and procedures capable of ensuring this understanding and the active role of the researcher in formulating questions and conducting empirical research. He understood that finding methods to study man in his totality and complexity was required: a unity of body and mind, a biological being, and a social being. There are, therefore, intrinsic relationships between *what and how one investigates*, i.e., between *the problem and the method*. That is why he says: “the search for the method becomes one of the most important tasks in research. The method, in this case, is at the same time a premise and a product, a tool, and a result of the investigation” (Vigotski, 1965/1996, p. 47).

His theoretical project was part of an ambitious research program that aimed to overcome the paradoxical formulations of the psychology of his time. On the one hand, subjective psychology, with roots in Descartes’ idealist philosophy, understood psychic phenomena as a manifestation of the spirit. Only a subjective and speculative description could be obtained. On the other hand, naturalistic scientific psychology, marked by evolutionary positivism, considered man’s conscious activity as a direct result of the evolution of the animal world, reducing the action of complex psychological processes to elementary mechanisms that could be studied in a laboratory. Contrary to these two trends, he sought to explain the *historical emergence of the human psyche* and the dynamics of its functioning through experiments with children and investigations into the forms of organization of mental processes in individuals from different cultures or with some kind of disability.

One must remember that many research projects in this line were conducted by his closest collaborators. Good examples of this are the ethnographic and intercultural expeditions conducted by Luria and a research team between

1931 and 1932 in Central Asia, and longitudinal studies also conducted by Luria, which were results of his effort to revive the so-called “romantic science” (Oliveira & Rego, 2010).

In the Vygotskian perspective, human beings are founded by culture and constitute themselves in the historical process. Being cultural, they are also necessarily *semiotic*, as they are built on *socially significant* relationships (with others and with the world). It is important to emphasize, as Oliveira (1992, p. 38) observes, that for him, culture was not thought of “as something ready, a static system to which the subject submits, but as a kind of ‘negotiation stage,’ in which its members are in constant movement of recreation and reinterpretation of information, concepts, and meanings.”

Under the influence of experiences transmitted, learned, and shared by previous generations, i.e., historical experience, individuals can adjust to the environment and adapt it to themselves. Through this dialogical relationship with culture, the subjects are constituted in an *active* “work” adaptation through the historical and social (concrete) experience. The *I-other* relationship – a relationship that is not only intersubjective but also social, i.e., historically produced – becomes, in this sense, the foundation of the cultural constitution of the human being.

From this perspective, the human psyche is, then, a social construction, the result of the appropriation of society’s cultural productions by individuals. This process is carried out through mediation by the other (other people from the cultural group), who indicate, delimit, and assign meanings to reality, and through technical or symbolic artifacts built over time. Human beings’ instruments and sign systems allow them to transform and learn about the world, communicate their experiences, and develop new psychological functions.

Signs have the unique feature of representing and signifying the world, i.e., they allow men to attribute signification to things and their actions, sharing their knowledge and experiences with others. Vygotsky attaches particular importance to language, more specifically to the *word* considered the sign par excellence. It is a functional mediator in the most diverse interactive situations, working as an instrument of communication and interaction between people and their social and cultural universe. Words, the verbal form of language as semiotic materials of the psyche, acquire a planning function of human actions and activities and, as a result, inaugurates new modes of mental functioning, the typically human “higher psychological functions”. Words are, therefore, an instrument to act in the world, to know and signify it, and, at the same time, they found the psyche and the individual as a cultural being (Vigotski, 1986/2000, 1921/2001b).

Thus, by modifying the world (from his action, reappropriation, and re-signification), the subject modifies himself: *man dominates himself from the outside* through psychological instruments. This would be the direction of his development: his psychological functions start from a more immediate connection with the context – from an “internal-external” or “objective-subjective” indifferentiation – towards overcoming the imperative of correspondence with external

reality, i.e., towards the ability for abstraction, generalization, and control of behavior and thought (typically human abilities). Furthermore and more importantly, what is internalized from social relationships and interactions, whatever they may be, is their *signification*. It is the appropriation of culture that enables him to signify and interpret the world. This intrinsically human ability is only achieved through learning. Therein lies the importance of education: it consists of a triple inseparable process of humanization, socialization, and singularization (Pino Sirgado, 2000).

The essential point in the interpretation of the subject's formation is that his individuation begins in the significant experiences provided in the culture, as summarized by Smolka and Góes (1993, p. 10):

In the process of development, which is more of a revolution than of evolution, the subject makes himself as a being differentiated from the other, but formed in the relationship with the other; singular, but socially constituted and, therefore, in an individual composition, but not homogeneous.

While Vygotsky refers to education and learning broadly, he directs his attention to several identifiable parts in his work, especially to school education. He postulates that, for individuals who live in educated societies, school plays a different and irreplaceable role in the appropriation of culturally accumulated experience by offering content and developing particular modes of thought. Therefore, it is possible to state that exclusion, failure, and school dropout by students (or the abandonment of students by the school) are factors that hinder the subject's individual and social development.

However, it is essential to emphasize that it is impossible to assume universal and homogeneous effects of schooling. It is not any school or any pedagogical practice that will provide the individual with the possibility of developing more elaborate psychic functions. The impact of schooling will depend on the quality of educational practices carried out.

One last aspect deserves to be highlighted. It more specifically concerns the methodological issue involved in studying the constitution of subjectivities, which is a fundamental topic in Vygotsky's work, but still little explored by his contemporary interpreters. Inspired by Spinoza's philosophy and his incursions in literature (in particular in Hamlet's poetic narrative), Vygotsky transposes the understanding of the experience of art to life in order to understand how the *roles* constituted in social relations are *embodied* by the subject in the form of *drama*, which presupposes considering that life is structured as an "internal struggle of social positions converted into a personality dynamics that, therefore, cannot be harmonious, but tensioned, dramatic, in the sense of contradictory systems" (Vygotski, 1986/2000, p. 35).

Vygotsky uses the term *perejivanie* to explain how the environment influences people and how people assign meaning to the environment from a history of relations that constitutes their personalities. As Prestes and Tunes clarify,

*perejivanie*, for Vygotsky, does not concern a particularity of the individual, nor the social environment in which he finds himself, but the relationship between the two: "the environment does not exist in absolute; to understand and study human development, one must know the environment in its relation to each individual's specificities. No social environment exists without an individual who perceives and interprets it" (Prestes & Tunes, 2012). In a recent article, Toassa and Souza (2010) analyze the changes in the author's ideas about the term *perejivanie* throughout his work, highlighting his methodological contribution to the analysis of the individual-environment relationship in human development, articulated to the concepts of consciousness and system.

Seen from this perspective, it is possible to affirm that subjectivity is constituted, therefore, in the dramatic dimension, in the tensions and contradictions inherent to the human condition, through the experience lived in the social relations, at the same time that it imprints meanings and senses on these experiences. The same situation, composed of the same events, will always provoke *singular interpretations and significations*.

Hence the proposal that psychology is studied in terms of drama, i.e., that one seeks to understand the dynamics of individual configurations from the dialectical relationships established between the subject and the historical-cultural circumstances in which his experiences are anchored and acquire meanings (Del Río & Álvarez, 2007; Smolka, 2021).

The set of Vygotskiyan theses is still current, and so are the challenges posed to the researcher interested in the relationships established between the subject and the social environment, particularly in the internalization of social relations, and especially in the *signification* that emerges from such a relationship. However, his ideas should not be understood as a final point, but rather as a start for further studies and questions. Several investigations carried out in recent decades, particularly in Psychology and Education, are moving in this direction (Smolka et al., 2021). Such research projects follow different lines, but most of them are inspired by the theoretical matrix developed by Vygotsky and his collaborators in the first decades of the last century. They allow new and fertile discoveries about the psyche and a more comprehensive and refined understanding of educational problems in their complexity.

### **Autobiographical reporting as an alternative methodological resource to study subjectivity**

Other investigations, conducted at different times and in different countries, in the realm of Psychology and of other areas of knowledge, broaden the understanding of the existing relationships between psychic processes and cultural influences and, above all, point to the need to create alternative methodological resources to study subjectivation processes. For this reason, they seek to understand the marks of individual experiences and of collective phenomena, as well as the boundaries that such dimensions penetrate. These studies

enable the indication of new investigative perspectives and, above all, the review of consecrated theses that point toward overcoming the classical individual-*versus*-society conflict.

Such works do not contradict the basic premises of the cultural-historical approach, but allow reviewing, adjusting, and updating Vygotskian theoretical matrix postulates. A brief comment on these contributions helps solidify the argument that personal memories organized as reports, narratives, testimonies, and autobiographical testimonies are valuable sources to understand the dynamic constitution of each person's history and processes (simultaneously singular and plural) of his subjectivity configuration.

In addition to studying the constitution of subjectivities, this methodology identifies constitutive elements of collective and discursive memory and the social and polyphonic voices that permeate the reports (Bakhtin, 1979/1992). Given the collective character of memories, they also construct a general panel of the different forms of influence received and processed by individuals throughout life. However, the intention is not to use biographical data to illustrate typical forms of behavior, the result of what Bourdieu (1996) called "the style of an era or a class", but to investigate the interdependence of factors that originated specific combinations in the life history of each subject.

In human and social sciences, the debate about relationships established between the individual and society, the specific and the universal, the unique and the repeatable, the singular and the plural, has always aroused thought-provoking studies and exciting discussions. It occurs especially among philosophers, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and psychologists (the works by Bourdieu, 1996; Chartier, 1990; Elias, 1939/1994; Ginzburg, 2006 are good examples of the diverse interest in the subject). For contemporary researchers from different theoretical affiliations, such topics are still on the agenda. They can be identified in studies related to the field of subjectivity, identity constitution (in terms of a person or group culture), and memory (individual or collective). Such interest is identifiable, including by the significant number of publications directly or indirectly focused on these subjects (such as the works by Dubar, 2006; Melucci, 1991/2004; Touraine, 1998).

One can state that these topics, burning in the contemporary debate, indicate that history, identity, language, and memory are bordering, complex, and closely related themes, which can only be explored from multidisciplinary approaches and adequate theoretical-methodological resources.

It should be remembered that in recent decades the concept of identity itself has been extensively discussed, criticized, and even deconstructed by different authors from different areas of knowledge, such as Bauman (2005), Hall (1992/2003), and Rose (2013). Different perspectives criticize the idea of an integral, fixed, cohesive, stable and, unified identity. In addition to being multiple and provisional, they would be permanently constructed along with discourses, practices, and positions in specific historical and institutional places. Many of these authors argue that currently, due to the profound changes that have taken place in the context of families, media, and the world of work, the modes of

subjectivation are markedly fractured and fragmented. Therefore, subjectivities emerge within power games and are more the product of marking difference and exclusion than the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unit. Such postulates bring significant challenges to research on singularization processes. How to study the provisionality, multiplicity, and fluidity that characterize the construction of identity processes in the contemporary world?

The works developed within the scope of the so-called sociology of the individual offer exciting elements for analyzing the topic and the set of these questions. The studies by Martuccelli and Singly (among the leading representatives of this trend) assume that the individual and the singularity of his experiences should occupy a central place in research produced in the sociological field. As critics of the reductionist tendency present in the approaches of classical sociologies (which prioritized discussions around social classes and institutions), they look for new ways to overcome the mismatch between sociological interpretation and individual experiences. For these authors, individuals do not cease to singularize themselves beyond their positional characteristics (Martuccelli & Singly, 2009; Rego & Moraes, 2017).

The central axes of their research express their interest in doing what they attribute to being the main epistemological challenge of sociology today: "understanding how, in different societies, through different historical processes, individuals are manufactured in a different way" (Martuccelli, 2010, p. 6). To respond to this challenge, Martuccelli, for example, tried to empirically circumscribe the individual's figure in the historical universe of South America. His interest is coherent with the need to study a particular historical, social, economic, cultural, and political context to establish connections between structural changes and subjective experiences lived by each individual.

In recent decades, there has also been a significant appreciation of the subject's narrative forms in different areas of knowledge. Such interest stemmed from the Human Sciences transformations and was referred to in different ways: a linguistic turn, hermeneutic turn, or even a semiological turn. A kind of sacralization of the first-person account and the individual experience occurs currently, despite being considered a literary genre of lesser value or dubious source for historiography a few decades ago. Sarlo (2007, p. 18) summarizes the historical reasons that explain this subjective shift and the current interest in the *subject's reason*: "the topic of the subjects' identity (examined from testimonies and other forms of first-person narrations) today takes the place that was occupied by structures in the 1960s."

Delory-Momberger makes an interesting reflection on the crucial role of narratives and the possibilities for research. Supported by Paul Ricoeur, especially in what the author called the weaving of plot, she explains the dynamics involved in the narrative of life: that's what "gives a *story* to our life: we don't make the narrative... of our life because we have a story; we have a story because we narrate our lives" (Delory-Momberger, 2008, p. 37). There is an intimate relationship between reports and the historical-cultural context in which the subjects live: "the stories we tell of

our lives *are written* under the socio-historical conditions of the time and culture (of cultures) to which we belong” (Delory-Momberger, 2008, p. 38). Thus, the biographical representations of the subjects expressed in their life narratives constitute privileged material for accessing how men of a time, a culture, a social group (auto)biograph their lives.

In the field of Psychology, several current works highlight the role of memory and narrative in the constitution of subjectivities and investigate the so-called “narrative identity.” In other words, how individuals employ narratives to develop and sustain a sense of personal unity and purpose. For these researchers, the narrative plays a central role in forming identities (Vieira & Henriques, 2014).

In a large part of European and US Psychology (especially that supported by Vygotskian assumptions), there is even an expressive interest in the subject, evidenced by the growing number of publications, lines of investigation, and scientific meetings on the subject. Examples of such studies are Salgado and Hermans (2005), Valsiner and Rosa (2007), Vassilieva (2016), and Wertsch (2002). From this perspective, the emphasis is on the plural and polyphonic nature of subjectivity. Such studies represent a vital contribution, as they make it possible to further the topic of the construction of the self as socio-cultural and psychological entities and also help to understand the role of memory and culture in this dynamics.

In the early 1990s, Bruner had already recognized that the study of autobiographies could represent a valuable methodological resource for investigations in the psychological field, especially concerning the constitution of subjectivity. They express meanings that are culturally constructed by the subject, revealing the marks of historical and cultural traits internalized in a given time and society. According to Bruner, how the personal narrative is managed echoes the “mentality” of an era. However, at the same time, autobiographical accounts serve to make us singular. After committing to the particular point of view, the past becomes that version or modulates itself accordingly (Bruner & Weisser, 1995).

The autobiographical narrative has the function of organizing the lived experiences and giving meaning to life itself. However, what the subject narrates about himself should not be understood as an expression of a solitary and individual speech since other voices are inexorably incorporated into the narrator’s discourse. By drawing attention to the polyphony of voices and the intertextuality involved in the construction of memory, Bakhtin (1979/1992, pp. 168-169) argues: “Without the narrative of others, my life would be not only incomplete in its content but also internally disordered, lacking the values that ensure the biographical unity.”

Furthermore, the autobiographical account can omit crucial issues capable of producing a powerful effect on the constitution of our identity processes. Memory is as selective as forgetting. We always recreate the past and mix memories and forgetfulness (Ricoeur, 2007). There is a permanent dialogue between these two instances: we see and question the past with the present’s eyes. In other words, the content of memories will always be evaluated with

current resources, images, and ideas, as remembering is not re-living but re-making, reconstructing, and re-elaborating past experiences (Nora, 1987). Individual memory also develops from a community base that sustains and gives shape to these memories. As Halbwachs (1976) taught us, social groups determine what is “memorable” and how it will be remembered.

When elaborating an autobiographical narrative, the individual may, therefore, underestimate or overestimate facts or circumstances that he considers more or less legitimate in his trajectory. It is an aspect that characterizes the work involved in the narrative of a life trajectory, resulting from the meanings of the subject’s complex social experiences and the context in which the narrative is produced. From this perspective, there is no concern to verify if the person told the “truth.” The interest is precisely in what was remembered, even if only in the context of that narrative (Ricoeur, 2007). Therefore, we can affirm that memory is crucial for knowing what we were, confirming what we are, and projecting what we want to be.

Memories are not only individual, but also social and collective. Thus, the analysis of autobiographical narratives is potentially fertile for a general understanding of the various sources of the constitution of subjects throughout their lives and the multiple networks of signification constructed by the individual in a given time, culture, and social group.

Autobiographical accounts also help to overcome postulates about linearity, evolution, continuity, and order in development. Instead of being progressive and predictable, the narratives show that development must be understood as a process that simultaneously includes advances and setbacks, mainly ambiguities, discontinuities, and ruptures. The narratives also evidence the importance of the imponderable, the accidental to which we are all subject. Above all, as specific unpredictable facts, incidents, episodes, or experiences, it plays a fundamental role in the course of a person’s development, breaking the possibility of deterministic analyses of cause-and-effect relationships in the construction of the psyche and the illusion of the subject’s control over his own life. The imponderables are part of the complex game of forces present in the constitution of the singularity traits of each human subject, showing his historical nature almost caricaturally.

## Discussion

As seen, the possibilities that autobiographical narratives offer to investigations into subjectivity are significant. They make it possible to understand, on the one hand, the role played by culture in the configuration of the subject’s psychic universe and, on the other, the active and dialectical way in which the individual internalizes the instruments offered by the cultural universe. The narratives enable us to understand how the subject interprets and gives meaning to his trajectory and the plurality of individual paths within broader processes of history and culture.

An individual's experience is continually recognized as being more than the words that speak about him and that, as a speech genre, every (auto)biographical narrative intends to establish linearity, coherence, and continuity for experiences and experiences that are always dispersed, multifaceted, fragmentary, and discontinuous. However, for human development research, the open possibilities are related, among other aspects, to the perspective of understanding the socio-historical origin of mental processes and examining the phenomena in their complexity and singularity. In summary, the study of autobiographical narratives allows us to approach what Vygotsky called "dramatic organization of the psyche," representing, therefore, an alternative for facing the problematic (and always unfinished) task of studying the human condition. We understand that this type of investigation can also be very interesting for the educational field.

In Education, it is possible to observe the interest in autobiographies since 1990. Life stories are generally used to develop a broad spectrum of research on the teaching profession and teacher training devices in this area. On the other hand, this type of report is not usually adopted to study the singular constitution of students. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the use of this methodological resource, combined with other types of investigation (such as case studies, ethnographic research, the study of official documents, and other written sources), can also be beneficial for understanding the differences presented by each student at school and for evaluating the impacts of school experiences on students. As mentioned earlier, the research we have carried out (or supervised) in the last few decades is based on these assumptions. Without intending to present a comprehensive synthesis, we will highlight below a few aspects that summarize the results obtained so far.

Even when long distanced from school benches, people are generally still able to recall and narrate many aspects of their school trajectories with a good deal of detail. Having so much to report already demonstrates the significant space occupied by school in their lives. This characteristic, in turn, seems to be associated with the type of experiences carried out at school or made possible by it (good or bad, challenging or not, coercive or liberating), in a prolonged and crucial phase, from childhood to entry into the adult stage.

Obviously, they do not remember the same things, not even with the same intensity. Facts that were remarkable and significant for some are irrelevant for others. This can be justified, in part, by the different ways of interpreting the past in light of the present. But not only that. The different ways of relating to school, established by each subject, also significantly affect the memory's form and content of that period. Although school is often treated as something generic and the impacts of schooling as a homogeneous process, the contact with the different testimonies of those who spent some time at school allows us to remember that, behind this apparent unity, a multiplicity of experiences hides, which are always signified in a particular way.

However, after interpreting the significant events of which they were participants or witnesses, the subjects restore memories that are also group memories. Thus, school recollection allows us to reconstruct a fragment of what can be called "school culture" and discover traits that characterized the educational system in the period in which they were students.

The study of narratives also states that the type of schooling experienced is an essential factor in defining the nature of its influence on the individual. In other words, the pedagogical proposals developed, the profile of teachers, the type of treatment, and expectations placed on students, etc., can have different impacts on them (concerning cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions). However, we reiterate: these will never be precisely the same for all students, even if they are submitted to the same educational model. Everyone experiences school, but it has different meanings for each one.

On the other hand, the reports make it possible to observe that the psychosocial effects of schooling result not only from experiences lived at school, but from a series of other inseparable factors. They are related to the social context in which the individual lives, especially those associated with the practices and meanings in their socio-cultural universe. Therefore, school learning must be understood by considering how the school community integrates social practices and broader cultural patterns.

In summary, the reports show the multiplicity of factors involved in the constitution of students' psychic universe and help to understand the design of the multiple bonds of the interdependence of individual histories in the fabric of social relations. Thus, the issues involving the analysis of the impact of schooling (and the very constitution of subjectivities) cannot be discussed separately from society and the subject, who is the producer of complex significations.

The results of the studies presented here allow, on the one hand, to understand how the *singularity* that characterizes each student and the *heterogeneity* present in any human group is constituted. On the other, they bring exciting elements to thicken the debate on equality and school justice. They make it possible to see students as concrete subjects, inserted in complex social realities, marked by diversity and, in the Brazilian context, aggravated by profound social inequality.

However, this should not be understood as a simple compliment to differences, pluralities, and diversities, which is so in vogue in contemporary educational discourses. The set of arguments presented indicate that it is not a question of "mere tolerance or respect for differences." On the contrary: they lead us to recognize that school needs to take *singularities* as a starting point and not as an end, since it has unequivocal responsibilities (although not exclusive) in the cognitive, affective, and social transformations of an individual. In the words by Vygotsky: "... to educate always means to change. If there were nothing to change, there would be nothing to educate" (Vygotski, 1921/2001a, p. 140).

We agree with Martuccelli when he summarizes the main challenges for research and the contemporary educational system in various parts of the world. His diagnosis and prognosis on the notion of uniqueness are accurate:

It introduces immeasurable criteria for evaluation, diminishes the scope of any logic of comparison or competition, and presupposes that institutions cannot only take into account differences between individuals to achieve equality, but also that institutions treat individuals in a personalized way and sometimes according to singular and distinct goals. Without abandoning the discussions about inequality and difference, I believe that in the coming years, progressively, debates about school justice will be marked by the seal of singularity (Setton & Sposito, 2013, p. 267).

We believe that the perspectives discussed and pointed out in this essay collaborate, albeit modestly, to combat particular deterministic and stigmatizing views (based on innatism and environmental assumptions) about children, adolescents, their families of origin (especially the poorest ones), which insist on perpetuating themselves. This is particularly important in the contemporary Brazilian scenario, still strongly marked by an implicit assumption that deserves to be questioned. There is no escape for the poorest, as their fates are already sealed.

As Patto (2000) has shown in his pioneering studies on the production of school failure, Psychology (as well as other areas of knowledge) has served to reinforce these ideas, insofar as, for a long time, it advocated an ideal model of universal development, consequently, contributing to the construction of an ethnocentric, restrictive and naturalizing view of inequality. These controversial positions served as a kind of alibi for the problems generated in school itself or in the broader social context, and enabled the legitimization of a discourse that, among other developments, not only placed on the student the cause of school problems, but also often pathologized the problems of teaching and learning (Collares & Moysés, 1996; Patto, 2000).

In this context of such hopelessness, understanding how subjectivities are forged, how differences are constituted, and, above all, recognizing the vital role of education and teaching in the direction of individual processes can help us to face the immense responsibilities that the world and the future propose to each of us.

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