

Getting stories in movement

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1. Connectivity is a process between doing research and marking a path

*Wayfarer, there is no path
Wayfarer, the only way
Is your footprints and no other.
Wayfarer, there is no way.
(Machado, A.)*

Qualitative research in the field of Adult Education, when following an interpretive approach (Denzin, 2000), is a process that cannot be disconnected from the researcher and the subjects under study. In the following pages, the principle of “connectivity” (Bateson, 1972, 1979) presents itself as a path in which the lives of woman, doctoral student, educator, pedagogue and teacher of the Feldenkrais method (the multiple identities of the researcher) overlap, dialogue with each other and come into resonance and/or conflict with the participants in the inquiry – in ways that are rarely described or theorised academically (Burke, 2002, p. 4). The case study which this work was taken from is the doctoral dissertation¹ that, in three years of field research and data analysis, has tried to understand the dis/orientation (Formenti, 2016) in existential terms and has questioned the processes of orientation and disorientation beyond the traditional research areas devoted to the theme of choosing a school, a university and/or a profession. I describe as a journey, a non-predefined path, the encounter with two groups of adult women living in residential mother-and-child institutions and with the professionals working with them. We will see how these dimensions have emerged since the early stages of the study, during the meeting for the presentation of the project. Here, I gathered in particular

¹ Luraschi, S. (2017). *Per/mettere le storie in movimento. Il posizionamento dinamico del ricercatore e la riflessività embodied in pedagogia*. Tesi di Dottorato in Scienze della Formazione e Comunicazione (Tutor Formenti, L.), Dipartimento di Scienze Umane per la Formazione “R. Massa”, Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca.

the desire of one of the community coordinator to reflect on the issues of the educational care, and not only that:

“We would like to expose ourselves. [...] We need to know how to create a space for thinking. With this job, it’s hard for me to unwind, because these mothers and children are always here. When I’m at home playing with my kid, I think about the mothers here and how they must feel about living with their children in here.”
(Tamara², transcript from the field research journal)

For the pedagogical researcher, entering into a system also – and mainly – means stirring new desires and generating new emotions, at times confused and contradictory, to take care of. The women’s admission to the residential institution in states of presumed dis/orientation grants them, upon referral from the local Social Services and the Family Court, a source of help and support so they can live their condition of parents in relation to their own biography and aspirations of personal independence. I was told by the coordinator that every day the educators addressed with the women issues related to the concept of maternity in the strict sense, as well as those of adults with a desire for a satisfactory occupational dimension in terms of personal realisation, with an appropriate economic recognition and the possibility of reconciling working schedules and childcare. The women found themselves living in an institution after accepting the “proposal” of being admitted to a structure where they could re-orientate, re-design and re-take control of their lives. Apparently, though, most of these desires didn’t seem to achieve their realisation and the women, in the words of one of the coordinators, appeared to live in a state of bewilderment. Not an inner one, but a caused one:

“Sometimes these women come from places that are far from the structure and finding a job from here is impossible. They don’t have their own car and many of them don’t even have a driving license, so, even if they found a job, it would be very complicated for them to reach their workplace using public transportation, which is very scarce in this area. Some need to ask for a special permission from the social services, others for a court order, because, for their personal safety, they cannot leave without authorisation.” (Leonia, transcript from the field research journal)

The words of Leonia begin to suggest the idea that the existential state of presumed dis/orientation might be related to the organisation of the structure’s services, and, in fact,

² Fictional name taken from the novel *Invisible Cities* “Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things [...]” (Calvino, 1972).

directly connected to the social policies that, for safety or practical reasons, tend to move the women away from their places of origin. This feeling of estrangement and isolation will emerge – as we will see later – through the metaphor of “bewilderment” as a reinterpretation of the concept of dis/orientation. That of the institution appears therefore as a territory where women with “difficult” existential paths live together in a context that is not very accommodating for a woman’s practical needs (house, work, child and family care services, etc.). Here is how one of the two educators feels about this situation:

“Just today I was talking to Esmeralda³, who has been in this institution for eight months. She was asking me: «Where is my place? Out here, close to the structure, or where I used to live before?». Honestly, this is a question that doesn’t have an answer, because where she will live in the future depends on so many factors and these are issues that are usually dealt with directly by the social services and where the educators and the women has little or sometimes – and I am sorry to say – no say in the matter.” (Tamara, transcript from the field research journal)

Looking at the lives of the women in a residential mother-and-child institution from a systemic perspective has meant wondering about the extended systems that they are part of – the original family unit, the community, the social, geographical and economical territory where they live. The stories reported by Tamara and Leonia give shape to the idea that when an individual appears disoriented/bewildered, he/she is never alone. There are other individuals and contexts in the system, which intersect and create constraints and opportunities. It is therefore a matter of making a change in those thinking habits that consider education, and pedagogical research, aimed at solving «new emergences» (Cambi, 2003), to highlight research as an opportunity for epistemological reflection.

In order to connect the topic of orientation to that of relational dynamics and positioning, I would like to illustrate the systemic idea of positioning. According to Morelli, the meaning of landscape as a living place and space emerges indeed from positioning and from the subject-world relationship:

“[...] landscape is, after the familiar faces, the first impression of the world that everyone of us develops. [...] In this sense, landscape is an integral part of our living space and, at the same time, the result of our acting inside it. Landscape derives

³ Fictional name taken from the novel *Invisible Cities* “It is more difficult to fix on the map the routes of the swallows, who cut the air over the roofs, dropping long invisible parabolas with their still wings [...]” (Calvino, 1972).

from our emission – enactment – of signals and actions, from our presence.”
(Morelli, 2011, p. 15-19)

Dis/orientation can therefore become a generative opportunity for walking – *odos* (Baracchi, 2008) in the meaning of marking a path. In an etimo-logical sense, this translates the movements of a wayfarer who proceeds without following a certain direction, without a clear way. From a methodological perspective, this path combines the steps ahead and the steps back of the wayfarer with the disorientation of the researcher/participant who asks him/herself questions without knowing in advance which direction his/her work will take. The following pages will explain how the theme of dis/orientation is embodied not only in the biography of the women, but also and above all in the context that they inhabit. In this sense, the institution has acquired the characteristics of a forced system that marks movable boundaries of a territory which is difficult to recognise in a clear way.

2. Learning emerges from the experience of bewilderment

The educational research is conducted in living places and situations that are limited to particular environments, events and encounters in which the subjects have the opportunity to learn. According to Demetrio, there is a space in the educational qualitative research where the research itself becomes for the researcher a holistic and polymorphic educational process in which he/she introduces him/herself:

“in order to observe it and listen to it, to interact with it and provoke it, to learn and discover it in its various constitutive components, without ever moving away from it, contrary to what has happened in the research practice that believed it could lock this object into the walls of a laboratory. We should not speak of laboratories, but of living places and contexts that shape existence and are able to bring to the surface the signs of an educational process that is always in progress, therefore dynamic, and whose results are unpredictable.” (Demetrio, 1992, p. 15)

This space-time of “micro-pedagogy” (Demetrio, 1992) allows the researcher to consider the subjects as living organisms on a path, i.e. in a constant change in search for states of balance that could bring them to recognise their own complex identity. In my vision, I interpret this state of balance in dynamic terms and draw the idea from the experience of embodied learning. As a researcher with a specific training in the educational method created by Moshe

Feldenkrais, my vision is clearly influenced by this somatic approach. Feldenkrais regarded posture as a dynamic adjustment of the Body-Mind system in continuous interaction with the environment; therefore, the word posture alone didn't satisfy him because it conveys a sense of inaction:

“Straight posture means vertical alignment. But all the words in this area, including posture, refer to something rigid and static. A careful examination clearly shows that straight posture is in fact dynamic, with a constant adjustment of the body structure, more than statically fixed.” (Feldenkrais, 1972)

For this reason, he coined the term “acture” (Feldenkrais, 1949) as the synthesis of action and posture. While weaving the threads of my experience between educational research and embodied learning, I have come to examine in depth the idea of existential dis-orientation as an embodied practice and a sensorial experience, because when we think of our body, the authenticity of the experience passes through the adoption of a posture or an “acture”. In the research I have connected approaches that are seemingly far from each other – *cooperative inquiry* (Heron, 1996), embodied learning (Feldenkrais, 1985) and embodied narratives (Formenti, West, & Horsdal, 2014) – in order to call the body into an authentic experience, by offering Awareness Through Movement (Feldenkrais, 1972) classes in alternation with suggestions for auto/biographical writing as opportunities for collecting qualitative data on life in the institution. In fact, after the presentation of the project to my fellow travellers, which turned out to be an actual moment of collaborative inquiry in which from the very beginning the eleven participants (divided into two groups) started sharing their experience and giving substance to their participation to the research process, I decided to devote an entire second meeting to the definition of a common code of ethics and to the authorisation of the use of personal data. The abstracts from the conversations generated during this second meeting will be described and analysed in an interpretive light in the following paragraph.

The definition of a common code of ethics and the authorisation for the use of personal data are routine procedures in the auto/biographical research (Merrill & West, 2009), motivated not only by the well-known issues on privacy and informed consent, visions that are in my opinion conventional and reductionist, but also by the awareness of co-constructing a relational space with the participants which is “sufficiently good” (West, 1996). On the contrary, in a forced context such as that of the community, these procedures turn out to be not only disorienting, but also bewildering:

“I would speak about bewilderment rather than disorientation, as I prefer the term familiarisation rather than orientation. The words orientation/disorientation are usually connoted in a positive sense and in a negative sense respectively [...]. The act of orienteering has two connected etymologies: taking position in relation to the four cardinal points and turning to face the East. The first one refers to the idea of positioning in relation to the environment, the second one has to do with the verb “orior”, to be born, to rise.” (Vitale, 2016, p. 188-189)

Re-interpreting dis/orientation as bewilderment recalls to the flow of experience, an oscillatory movement of fluctuating balance of orientation in relation to an environment, at the centre of which is not the reaching of a static and fixed position, but the unwinding of a dynamic and interactive process of research. These considerations allowed me to move the focus of the research from the idea of interrogating the disorientation in relation to environment and movement, to that of facing a process of relational encounter based on dialogue, conversation and embodied experience, coherent with the metaphor of the path. In literary terms, writer Italo Calvino – who inspired the fictional names that I have chosen for the participants in the inquiry – claims that a person in movement is a “halved” subject:

“I was whole and all things were, for me, natural and confusing, stupid as the air; I thought I was seeing everything and it was but a shell. If ever you become half of yourself, and I wish you that, lad, you’ll see things beyond the common intelligence of the whole brain. You will have lost half of you and the world, but the remaining half will be a thousand times deeper and more valuable.” (Calvino, 1993, p. 44)

Bringing the attention to the “educational landscapes”, with their related “bewilderments” expresses the ethical and aesthetic choice of a reflective researcher who experiences the relationship with him/herself, the other and the world as a structural coupling (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Following the literary system of Calvino, who tells us about invisible cities of bewildering fascination, the researcher becomes therefore only a part of a bewildering universe which is infinitely small and big, and from there, in an attempt to cross these two opposites, the path of research and reflexivity takes its form. Presenting the residential mother-and-child institution from a landscapist and narrative perspective allows me to redesign my presence, participative and fragile, which recognises the relational and emotional aspects of becoming involved in a research field.

As already said, the project involved two groups of women living in facilities situated in different landscapes: one in a metropolitan area, the other in a provincial one. The dimension

of context became the topic of interesting conversations during the meeting devoted to the negotiation of the code of ethics. In that moment, after I had presented my proposal to the participants and we had read it together, we reflected on their condition of women and, as you will see, of mothers “housed” in an institution with a limited freedom of movement between inside and outside.

In fact, in the institution situated in a small town, in an isolated area in the middle of a pine forest and not far from a pre-alpine lake in Lombardy, discussing the code of ethics brings up the issue of the freedom of movement. Here, sitting in a living room facing a big garden, the fellow travellers are having a conversation which describes a scene from their everyday life:

Esmeralda: “Today we can’t go outside in the garden, you know, because of the Rodent Control...”

Raissa: “Shall we go to the lake? It’s three kilometres from here...”

Esmeralda: “There’s a small sheltered beach and it’s better than staying locked inside...”

Raissa: “And the bar near the beach has good ice-cream...”

Silvia (researcher): “You seem navigated, do you often go there?”

Raissa: “Yes, not long ago I used to go out quite often with one of the mothers that was here...”

Esmeralda: “Lucky you. Nowadays, planning with the educators and the volunteers to go out is hard...”

Silvia: “What do you mean?”

Esmeralda: “Silvia, you see where we are here? We’re isolated on the top of a hill, at the end of a dirt road. I don’t have a driving license and, even if I had one, I don’t have a car. Here we depend on the good will of the educators or some volunteer and we always have to ask for the coordinator’s permission.”

Silvia: “And is that difficult?”

Raissa: “Yes, it’s difficult to imagine if you don’t live here. You need time to ask for permission. And permission for what?”

Esmeralda: “For that ice-cream that Raissa likes...”

Silvia: “If it were for some good ice-cream, I admit that I would do anything, too!”

Raissa: “Yes, ice-cream tastes like freedom, here.”

Laughter.

(Transcript of the audio recording from the research journal)

Raissa and Esmeralda’s words express the desire of going out into the open air to spend a nice afternoon on the shore of a lake not far from the structure. The desire for freedom of movement and the search for beauty is shown in Raissa’s sensorial image that pictures to her

friends the pleasure of tasting ice-cream at the bar near the beach. This desire though, thanks to the questions asked by the researcher who by the use of dialogue wants to give voice to the obvious, turns out to be almost impossible in the immediate, since the two women recount how difficult and complex it is to plan a trip by car to reach the nearest town. Moreover, Raissa explains to the researcher how their every movement depends on the authorisation (“permission”) from the educators or the availability of a driver (educator or volunteer), since none of them has her own car or a driving license.

Furthermore, irony and humour are used in this dialogue, as in the previous one. The researcher, as well as the participants, use it quite often (e.g. “If it were for some good ice-cream, I admit that I would do anything, too!”; “Yes, ice-cream tastes like freedom, here”). This, according to the systemic epistemological premises for which playing is the composition of different frameworks, brings me to consider this relational model as descriptive of a complex situation, which shows the feeling of impasse that the participants are experiencing. In the conversation we are dealing with a potential conflict of premises and frameworks (e.g. “Silvia, you see where we are here?”). In fact, using a form of self-irony which they are more or less aware of, the researcher and the women express their fragilities, facilitating therefore creative communication and the creation of a delicate balance – never given once and for all – which characterises the dynamic nature of the process. It is not a case that many studies on resilience, i.e. people who are able to reorganise their life in a positive way when confronted with difficulties and to come out stronger, insert humour as a constitutive element of this condition (Cyrulnik, 1999).

The ability of the participants to deal with their limited movement possibility is experienced and recounted differently in the two structures. Whereas in the structure situated in a place difficult to reach without a car the fellow travellers describe their state of isolation by expressing the desire to go out on a trip to the lake, in the one situated in the city the experience of life in a forced environment brings up different thoughts and emotions.

In this different landscape, my fellow travellers live on the second floor of a religious institutions, which the mother-and-child structure is a part of. The building is surrounded by a thick stone wall that delimitates its perimeter and separates it from one of the main streets, which links the city centre to the suburban area. Here, during the conversation following the reading of the code of ethics, Ersilia and Moriana share with the group a thought which is very important to them:

Ersilia: "I have to tell you something: living in an institution has helped me, even if I don't like it here. Before coming here I was very confused: I could tell you one thing and then change my mind five minutes later. I can't say I'm happy, but I can say that staying in one place for a while has helped me think."

Moriana: "What do you mean? I don't understand."

Ersilia: "What I'm saying is that before, outside, I was confused and I couldn't think straight, but, at the same time, I had never thought that I would be forced to live here. It's not fair, at the end of the day."

Moriana: "Right, maybe there are other useful solutions to help people think. In here it's hard and out there everything is different. When you go out, in the city centre, you see the other women with their kids?"

Ersilia: "Yes, I picture them at home with their kids and I ask myself how their life must be. It's always very painful to think that my son is growing up in here..."

Moriana: "I know, that's why I can't bring myself to go out sometimes. What if I go out and my son realises that it's different outside and doesn't want to come back here anymore?"

Ersilia: "Especially them, they are young and didn't do anything to deserve this; sometimes I even feel guilty..."

Silvia: "How is life in here?"

Ersilia: "It's hard living in here: when I'm at home I cook and relatives and friends come to visit. But here I can't do that."

Moriana: "I feel like I can't do anything and when I know I can do something, I feel like I don't know how to do it anymore."

(transcript of the audio recording from the research journal)

The importance of this conversation emerges from Ersilia's incipit, which catches the attention of the group with the use of the context mark "I have to tell you something"; this expression introduces the sharing of a notion which is as important as it is complex to recognise and report, because it is made of emotions and feelings that are difficult to reconcile ("before, outside, I was confused and I couldn't think straight, but, at the same time, I had never thought that I would be forced to live here"). The narration brings up "fragments of a truth" that tastes like a discovery, where Ersilia tells that she has learnt to think because she was forced to stop and live in one place, but at the same time believes this "choice felt as an obligation" to be unfair towards her children. Moriana and Ersilia describe a feeling inside the community that refers to the image of total institutions (Goffman, 2003). Dialogue gives voice to a deep pain and the possibility to find alternative solutions to living in an institution for those women in a state of presumed fragility, or confusion, to use the word chosen by Ersilia. The deep confrontation, where once again the researcher asks few questions and lets

herself be guided by the conversation of her fellow travellers, reveals Moriana's bitterness, when she admits to be in a phase in which she is struggling to recognise her own agency in that context.

In conclusion, even though my fellow travellers and I were at our first experience of cooperative inquiry, our dialogues show how negotiating the code of ethics creates the possibility for the participants to be fully involved in the research process and also, surprisingly, to expose right away painful emotional issues of their everyday life. In this phase of the inquiry it becomes clear and tangible that conducting an embodied research means not only spending time and space in activities involving the body, but, above all, finding time and space for dialogue and conversation, so that the participants can focus their attention towards listening to themselves and recognising/consolidating their relationships with the others and the researcher. Self-awareness, the relationship with the other and the context speak about ourselves and our way of existing in the world. It also becomes clear, though, that the negotiation of the code of ethics doesn't solve the ethical issues of the researcher, but raises new dilemmas and contradictions, because it brings up profound questions about the power unbalance between researcher and participants. These doubts and paradoxes are so routed that are there even without us being aware of them in the immediate: they fluctuate in the air and can be nominated a bit at a time, without disappearing, but always remaining part of the process.

In my case, the asymmetry between my complete freedom of movement between inside and outside and the situation of forced living of the participants and their children, always clearly present in the group dialogues and reflections, will become a crucial issue. In fact, although I dedicated space and time to negotiation, in order to build a trustworthy relationship in which the participants could feel authorised to tell and become reflective about their context of experience. Although I convinced them that the research material would not be used for possible communication with the referents of the educational structures. Although I wanted to level the power asymmetry, a wish that is reflected by the informal tone which I used to speak to the women and by the jokes about the code of ethics and the ice-cream. Despite all this, the asymmetry remains.

The reflexive positioning is motivated by the desire not to "exploit people" (Merrill & West, 2009), but to present them with the possibility of answering or not answering my questions, without running the risk of not fulfilling my expectations. I believe, though, that clarifying the asymmetric relationship, instead of trying to deny it, can be more useful to create confidentiality and intimacy. Living in a shared space, of unpredictable actions and words and

of potentially generative, as much as unsettling dialogues, is a challenge for the cooperative inquiry.

3. Sharing the actions of the research to recognise assonances and differences

My research approach is based on the consideration of the people involved in the process not as data, but as living, conscious, intelligent and wise subjects who deserve a fundamental respect and who actively work with me to generate information, i.e. differences that generate differences. This professional deontology draws inspiration from values such as collaboration, cooperation, awareness and legitimation of one's self and the other. Bringing the research into the everyday life of people and working on the indissoluble link between personal and social (Christians, 2003) requires a careful and constant negotiation that can restore power and ability to act to the people in their living contexts without definitive and predictable results. Complex systems are unpredictable and uncertain, as we are reminded by the entire scientific tradition of Adult Education; the development of a project can therefore change and accept the unpredicted modifications, and the forks in the road, generated by the interaction among the participants and by contingent aspects of an evolutionary process, in constant orientation, inside the context where the research takes place. By orientation I mean an interpretive, social, shared process where, in analogy with the research process, nobody "orientates" anybody, but everybody orientates themselves with each other. The actions of the research are therefore shared by all participants and everyone is disoriented and oriented together. In a similar way, orientating in the research and dialoguing are complex and dynamic events that revolve around physical, relational, mental, perceptive, affective, emotional and value-related dimensions, which involve exploration in terms that are flexible and cannot be defined a priori. Interrogating the words of the participants to reconstruct the everyday meanings and thoughts (Mezirow, 1991), asking questions that lead to opportunities (Gardner, 2014), both speak of the dynamic positioning of the researcher, where the *embodied* (Shapiro, 2011) reflexivity (Hunt, 2013) in pedagogy finds expression in the awareness of having the power not to control the research processes, but only to ignite them. The research, then, doesn't pursue predictable or desirable results, but generates data that need to be interpreted in order to create new shared meanings in a relational logic between researcher and participants which is not hierarchic, but extremely collaborative, and which develops in the moment through the experience of uncertainty.

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