Autobiography and disability: educational perspectives

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Telling stories

- «A man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it» (Sartre, 1964).

- «For humans, story is like gravity: a field of force that surrounds us and influences all of our movements. But, like gravity, story is so omnipresent that we are hardly aware of how it shapes our lives» (Gottshall, 2013).
Why stories?

To **organize** and **share** experiences (Smorti, 1994; Bruner, 1983)

To anticipate the **future** (Demetrio, 2012)

To **navigate** and **orientate** oneself in the world (Bruner, 1989)
Homo narrans
First-person narratives as a tool for...

**Self knowledge and self analysis** (Cambi, 2007)

Representing and reconstructing past experiences = **creative act** (Ricoeur, 1994; Gusdorf, 1956)

**Metacognition** (Demetrio, 2012) and **resilience** (Cyrulnik, Malaguti, 2005)
From individual to collective

Stories are a direct social exchange of experiences (Benjamin, 1936)

Other's stories can make us better understand our story
Self narratives and disabilities

Self narratives:
- Autobiographies written by people with disabilities

Increasing the self-Knowledge:
- Metacognition
- Resilience

Increasing the community’s knowledge about «lived disability»:
- Overcoming prejudices/stereotypes
Talking about autism...

- **Autism as an “object of inspection”**
  
  «...right for the start, from the time someone came up with the word ‘autism’, the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced» (Williams, 1996, p.14).

- **Changing perspective...**
  
  - Self advocacy movement (e.g. ASAN, AFF)
  - Engagement of academically trained autistic in research
  - Autistic autobiographies
Only the top of a book mountain...

Autism from the «inside»

«Autism narratives are not just stories or histories, describing a given reality. They are creating the **language** in which to describe the experience of autism, and hence helping to forge the **concepts** in which to think **autism**» (Hacking, 2009)
Autism from the «inside»

Difference ≠ Disorder that needs to be cured
A different sensory world

- Different sensory and perceptual experiences = different **quality** and/or **intensity** of what is experienced

- **Hyper/hypo sensitivities** to stimuli (light levels, sounds, smells, colors, textures, tastes)

«Every time I am touched it hurts; it feels like fire running through my body» (Gillingham, 1995)
«Strange» and «bizarre» behaviours

➤ «Autistic people will instinctively reach for order and symmetry: they arrange the spoons on the table, they line up matchsticks or they rock back and forth (...). Rocking movements are deeply calming, suggesting the body itself can be used to soothe the effects of over stimulation through smooth, repetitive, predictable behaviors» (Prince-Hughes, 2004)
Communication

«Autistic people are "foreigners" in any society. You're going to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You're going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you've probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You're going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you're in charge, and let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world».

(Sinclair, 1993)
Challenging behaviours
Through **which lens** we see the disability?
Being a person before being on the spectrum

«I try my best to live with the good cards I was given not over-investing in my autism being the defining factor of my being (but having a healthy acknowledgement of it) that it's there but also thinking about other qualities I have such as being a writer, poet and artist. I do have disability, I do have autism and I have a "mild" learning disability that is true but I am a human being first and foremost. And for someone to be seen as person equal to everyone else is a basic human right.»

Paul Isaacs (2012), Living Through the Haze
Thank you for your attention!

Donna Williams, «TO DARE»

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