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The transformative potential of "coming out" narratives in young adults

Stefano Maltese*

Abstract

"Coming out" in the life of young adults is a challenging and transformative experience not only because it contributes to a process of the realization of sexual orientation and self identification, but also because it can trigger a critical and reflective process, the outcome of which may be a full subjectivation of life courses. This specific and crucial biographical event represents a transformative opportunity in accordance with Mezirow's transformative learning theory not only with regard to the clarification of one's sexual orientation but also to a full subjectivation of life courses, following a critical and reflective pattern.

Within this framework, "coming out" can be understood and explored according to a transformative learning matrix, which helps to identify the steps followed and the changes occurred over time in the meaning perspectives homosexual individuals use to frame their understanding of reality.

Keywords*: *Transformative learning; critical reflection; self-determination.

1. Introduction

"Coming out" as a step of the process of the growth of homosexual individuals (see Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982) represents for some people a fundamental moment in life, within a pedagogical context, it is composed of various and complex dynamics linked to this important process, and so that it can be configured as a formative opportunity to speak of oneself and to express one's being through actions of speech and discourse, it is important that the authors of coming out recognize it as a path of constant self-determination, recognizing the value of narrating their own experiences and needs, of sharing needs and difficulties, with the aim of combating social exclusion and isolation.

A pedagogical approach to subjectivation issues related to coming out allows to rediscover the ability to welcome and love oneself in one's own specificities and affections, needs and representations, a little (or much) more free from prejudices and labels, reading it as an opportunity for meeting and learning, questioning and dialoguing with oneself and with others.

Nonetheless, it cannot be reduced only to a confidential disclosure or an admission, but it must be understood as a disposition to a sound inner investigation and, at the same time, as a precise a performative act (see

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Burgio, 2012), which goes beyond self reporting, and unfolds as an inquiry process of self-disclosure, offering to the individual the possibility of identifying meanings that are not objective traces, but subjective and performative constructions, explored according to a transformative matrix. This has educational implications since it empowers the ability to trace a meaning that transcends the revelation of an objectivity, being above all a subjective interpretation of one's own reality; in this regard, the "coming out" performatively performs what it says, for the fact of having said it.

This specific and crucial biographical event represents a transformative opportunity in accordance with Mezirow's transformative learning theory (see Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2012) not only with regard to the clarification of one's sexual orientation but also to a full subjectivation of life courses, following a critical and reflective pattern (see King & Biro, 2006).

Moreover, if we understand "coming out" as a process of self-disclosure, we can see how it includes within itself an educational meaning, education being considered as the process of becoming oneself within the context of a critical and humanizing perspective; in these terms, it represents for a young adult an opportunity to transform his/her self-image through a sound process of reflection, which generates conscientization and liberation (see Freire, 2006) and produces a more authentic and complete engagement in his/her own life.

Nonetheless, this path is not linear: young people consider a variety of internal and external factors before arriving at decisions to disclose or conceal their identity; therefore identity management unfolds as a dynamic process that requires evaluations of diverse strategies to navigate this process, taking into account positive and negative effects disclosure and concealment may have (see Bry, Mustanski, Garofalo, & Burns, 2017).

Transformative learning theory highlights how the starting point of any learning process is a disorienting dilemma; in this case the homosexual individual represents himself/herself as a living dilemma, which needs to be solved through a transformative process in order to advance in his/her personal growth.

According to Mezirow, the process unfolds through a series of steps: a self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural or psychic assumptions; a recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change; an exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions; the planning of a course of action; the acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; the provisional trying of new roles; the building of competence and self-confidence in one's new roles and relationships; and a reintegration into one's life on the basis of the conditions dictated by one's perspective.

At the end of this process, the learning is the outcome of a sound "perspective transformation" occurring within three dimensions: psychological (changes in the understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle). "Coming out" involves all three of these dimensions, impacting on the way individuals see themselves,

on their worldviews, and on the way in which they narrate their stories and perform their actions within the context in which they live.

The final outcome of a transformative learning process is the expansion of individual consciousness through a sound modification of worldview, attitudes, and capacities. Accordingly, learning unfolds also as an educational trajectory, but, from a pedagogical perspective, it is the possibility to describe and reconstruct this trajectory that makes the difference.

The "coming out" related to homosexuality is literally a coming out, and the parallel with the etymological meaning of the term education, that is defined as a "pulling out", is immediately obvious. The pedagogical nexus that makes the narrative practice of declaring oneself homosexual potentially transformative resides in the possibility of manifesting to the world one's own authenticity, making much more evident the main goal of adolescent growth.

This conditions the relational modalities, and places additional obstacles in the way of the possibility of elaborating in an educational context all the transformative value of this dissonance, limiting the generative scope of these acts which, on the contrary, could trigger processes of change determinant for the development of the young person.

As a request for dialogue and understanding, "coming out" represents, on the part of the adolescents, a "proposal" to question the assumptions grounding the social model according to which they have been seen and treated as heterosexual.

The answer that the educational system must provide to this proposal can only be a transformative one, heading towards a profound change of the whole relational and social paradigm in all its complexity.

2. Methods

Goodson and Gill (2011) have described narrative as a "pedagogic site" and have identified the narrative process as a process of learning and transformation, examining how narratives connect with an individual's identity and agency. In this perspective the use of a narrative approach creates the educational conditions to activate and make visible learning and transformative processes connected with the experience of "coming out".

The capacity of narrating oneself as homosexual gives the individual the possibility of taking personal power of one's existence (I exist and I am like this) and of increasing one's ability to place oneself in the world for what one is. Thus, "coming out" acquires a formative value, as it allows the narrating individual to take charge of himself/herself, and of his/her own unrecognized history and to engage in a self-caring process. The educational value of "coming out" becomes evident in autobiographical narratives, taking into account the fact that this kind of narrative produces different versions of identity, framed by the social context and the dominant gender relations (see Kehily, 2010), and therefore makes explicit the transition

and the process of "subjectification" which involves a transformation from a supposedly heterosexual, and culturally established, identity, to a more authentic one recognized by the individual as his/her own.

Starting from the desire for a re-appropriation of one's own history, the narrative capacity of the individual sustains the "coming out" process, and builds up a bridge that allows him/her to move between two opposite sides. His/her own search for identity legitimization and the socio-cultural fabric within which this happens, represents an attempt to reduce the distance between the two sides, through an educational move.

For Bruner (2003[1992]:97) "our ability to translate experience into narrative terms is not just a childish game, but rather a tool for creating meaning that dominates much of life in a culture". The narration, therefore, is one of the main channels with which one has access to knowledge and builds knowledge of the world.

If narrating allows us to understand and give meaning to the world and the reality that surrounds us, when the narrative action puts the narrator in the place of the protagonist, the knowledge and the attribution of meaning will be directed precisely towards oneself and one's action.

In fact, Bruner (1991) identifies self-narration as a device useful to activate a specific reflexivity in canonical or traumatic biographical transition situations (such as the discovery of one's homosexuality or a "coming out" in adolescence); the transformative potential of "coming out" as a fundamental part of the process of self discovery, even before the social act, allows the individual to distinguish between old scripts written by others and one's own need for a personal rewriting from a new perspective.

Knowing and thinking about oneself becomes, in these terms, an essential component of the individual's educational path, which cannot be separated from understanding oneself in order to understand the world and, consequently, act in it.

The life stories become, in this perspective and in a more evident way with respect to the issues related to homosexuality, the way in which the individuals learn the systems of meaning settled in the culture of belonging. Telling and telling about themselves, through coming out, also represents the device through which people construct the meanings of their discoveries, organize and guide their actions.

The act of narrating oneself through coming out is, then, a practice that does not only concern an individual but also a social choice. This specific kind of narration becomes the primary device for interpreting and knowing the world according to a new perspective, to give meaning and meaning to individual and social action. So much so that:

> Human experiences not reworked through narrative thought, do not produce functional knowledge to live in the socio-cultural context but remain opaque events, without relations, meaningless on a personal, cultural and social level, which cannot be interpreted in reference to the intentional states of their protagonists. (Melacarne, 2018: 51)

Coming out as a narrative helps make the exceptional element understandable and allows for an unprecedented experience. The choice to talk about oneself through the declaration of one's sexual orientation determines how the individual decides to respond and manage that aspect of one's identity construction and at the same time leads to understanding identity as a continuous narrative construction that generates other ways to conceptualize the resulting personal change.

As evidenced by several authors (including Bruner) the narration of self can offer a better understanding of the experience because it is closely interconnected to the process of construction of the frames people use to give meaning to what they live.

If, therefore, the central concept of the pedagogical interpretation of the narrative of itself explored so far results in the possibility of giving meaning to one's life through stories, it seems legitimate to think, here, of a strong link with the key concepts of the theory of transformative learning, because individuals produce the meaning of their experiences and review that meaning through new conflicting experiences with their previous points of view.

If transformative learning involves a profound change of perspectives through which mental habits become more open, more permeable, more discriminating and better justified, through coming out it is a process of learning and transformation that engages individuals in cognitive processes of critical reflection and self-reflection, intuitive and imaginative explorations of their past, present and future history, as will be shown below.

The reference to "coming out" as a discriminating self-narrative passage allows us to understand the category of change as an important variable, but only the individual can account for this by putting his/her own history at the center of the process, not always dealing with visible external changes. A change that, not being objective in the canonical sense of the term, cannot be measured, explained or analyzed, but can be told and questioned, avoiding any reduction of its complexity.

If for heterosexual young adults sexuality is a fact that is taken for granted, for those homosexuals the right to enter their sexuality within the educational discourse becomes a precise request, which can be indicated as a real educational need.

On these bases we have designed a qualitative research study in accordance with a framework of narrative inquiry (see Connelly & Clandinin, 2004) focused on seventeen autobiographical narrative interviews with young homosexual adults living in southern Italy, who have identified in their "coming out" the turning point of their existential condition (see Maltese, 2017).

The research hypothesis is that "coming out" can be understood as a transformative learning experience taking into account the fact that the person himself/herself represents a "disorienting dilemma" with regard to the determination of his/her own objective of gender identity.

Within this framework, the research objective was to identify the challenges, dilemmas and new understandings that produce the educational

transformation in the "coming out" process. The issue of homosexuality, addressed in the interviews collected in the research (see Maltese, 2017), has been treated in close connection with the narrative practice of speaking of oneself, to oneself and to others.

3. Results

Taking advantage of the transformative potential of self-narration, the protagonists of the stories have grasped the educational opportunity to bring out the most authentic part of their identity, intervening on its composition through a reflective process which has helped them to recognize that their discontent and the process of transformation could be negotiated and shared. The narrative interviews have also highlighted the process through which young adults (alone or with the support of peers or older people) have had the opportunity to explore new roles, relationships and actions. It is no coincidence, then, that the biographical transition, which unites almost all the turning points of the seventeen life stories narrated in the interviews, is centered on the actual "coming out", or on episodes connected to it, reflecting how much this process, that leads to a realization of one's identity through speech and discourse, is intrinsically transformative since it has generated the possibility of planning new courses of action, of implementing new knowledge, skills and understandings in close connection with the narrative practice, and of self-narrating, to oneself and to others.

The young adults, in their "coming out", have produced narratives of themselves that seem to share characteristics with typical adolescent confidences in terms of the sharing of information and have learned from the interlocutors' questions and answers, triggering often reciprocally educational processes: "*I learned first of all that being homosexual is absolutely something to be proud of because it is, after all, a very normal thing*".

The departure from the social path that, before the "coming out", had imposed on them a silence or the building of heterocentric narratives, appeared in interviews as the result of growth, and made possible the affirmation of a need to be liberated, in the Freirian (2006) sense, from the oppression of cultural and social constraints, generating the possibility of understanding each other, of narrating and of giving oneself a more comfortable space in which to exist: "*I learned to be free*".

Each of the participants has been involved in a complex process of subjectivation (consisting of multiple components), that needs to be framed within the context of the prescriptions and the representations of the educational institutions (family, school, university etc.) within which we find the true fulcrum of destabilization, since as Foucault (1978) points out, bodies and pleasures are historically organized and sexuality is a device for the construction of individual identity.

Accordingly, the homosexual identity is built through the interaction between the individual and the context within which young adults try

out their new roles, becoming more and more self-confident in themselves and in the relationships they are engaged in, reintegrating roles and relationships into their own life on the basis of conditions dictated by the meaning perspectives they refer to.

In this specific case the context is culturally constrained by beliefs, stereotypes, social representations of homosexuality which represent a strong challenge for young adults willing to self determinate their own life according to a different meaning perspective compared to the one contextually legitimated and shared .

If the context is understood as a texture of "actors, scopes and memories" (see Cohen & Siegel, 1991) what actors believe and refer to; the shared understanding of the scope of individual and social life; the narratives and memories cultivated and transmitted, are constitutive elements in the educational process of individuals; accordingly, each one has to deal with them in order to grow and make meaning of his or her own experiences in a significant way.

These elements are part of the young adults learning process in its transformative dimensions, and should be taken into account in order to describe its unfolding.

Through the analysis of the transcripts it has been possible to identify the different transformative steps identified by Mezirow (1991) in all the interviews of the young people who have experienced a "coming out".

4. Data Analysis

Table 1 – Data Analysis: excerpts from the interviewees' narrations are analysed and the corresponding transformative steps are identified.

Transformative stages	Excerpts from interviews
Self examination with feelings of guilt or shame	*"You feel like an alien, you do not want to accept yourself… you try to avoid it, to behave as a heterosexual"; "I could not accept myself so I started questioning, I saw how the society around me reacted to this issue and therefore I was hiding myself… I was scared and understood all this as a bad thing since everybody thought of homosexuals as people to make fun of"…*
Critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions	*"I am surprised, if I look back…, remembering how, as I was growing up, I had been trying to put off my feelings, to reduce them (at least in public situations) to be ashamed of them, in a certain sense"*

Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change	*"It has been very important that I could tell this to my mother since I was not yet convinced of myself, so as I told it, I accepted myself […] it has been a sort of liberation. Then I met a friend […] he is very open and in talking with him I discovered myself";* *"I could put myself in other people's shoes, people who are experiencing situations even worse than mine, so I understood that there is always somebody who is in a worse condition than me"*
Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions	*"Psychologists offer you other alternatives, through dialogue they open up other views and show you other options"*
Planning a new course of action	*"I want to have a normal life, go to university"; "I have to leave, I cannot stay in Naples, for me it is impossibile".*
Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans	*"When you have very strong experiences, which are not common to everybody, experiences in which you are alone against the whole world and against your parents, you become stronger and you understand that, no matter what, the only final point on the page of life is death. Everything is possible"; "our generation has to face the rejection of older people, since they belong to another world. But going on like this, our children, and their children, will be more able to understand"*
Provisional trying of new roles	*"It is a stairway, this passage has not been hard, and slowly I have become more and more free"*
Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships	*"I went to Rome and there started a rebirth; I saw other people who were happy with this […] I was happier to be as I am […] I felt free… so I started to take care of myself"*
Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective.	*"After my outing I have started dating with no problems, I have totally changed, I have a new will to live […] and I have a new relationship with my family"…*

Moreover, we could acknowledge the emergence of new and different epistemic, psychological and socio-linguistic meaning perspectives at different levels (individual life, family life and social life) not only within discursive processes (see Kincaid, 2010) but also in the orientation of life courses (see Eichler & Bernarte, 2018) and in their unfolding.

5. Meaning perspectives

Table 2 – Adopting several perspective throughout the research in relation to the interviewees' narration excerpts.

Perspectives	Excerpts from interviews
Epistemic perspectives	*"I refused to think"; "I have discovered"; "I started questioning"; "then I understood that…"; "I have become more aware".*
Psycholological perspectives	*"At high school I was in a total crisis"; "it was uncomfortable that others believed I was heterosexual"; "I felt ashamed"; "I feel free"; "I hate and love this town".*
Socio-linguistic perspectives	*"My home is like a minefield";"it is a stairway"; "I started playing a sort of hide and seek"; "I felt something heavy on my shoulders"; "my gay radar".*

The transformative learning process has been explored also by focusing on different temporal dimensions which are extremely relevant within an autobiographic and narrative frame of reference (see Merril & West, 2009): young adults learn from their own past experiences (before "coming out") rethinking them according to new meaning perspectives ("*When I was a child I played with my sister…I hated football…It is like I have always known; "it has been so since I was born…I have always known that this is part of me but I did not accept myself"); they also learn from their present experiences, with which they are engaged with a new awareness ("we who are gay have a very peculiar worldview compared to men and women[…] it is a nice thing, I like being gay"); finally, they learn from the future, intended as an emancipatory project of self determination ("I plan to live in London, to build up a family").*

6. Discussion

Though the exploratory study was contextualixed to a specific territorial area in Southern Italy and the sample, constructed through a snowball

procedure, was quite small, we have had the opportunity to reach a theoretic saturation point; this has been helpful to confirm the hypothesis that "coming out" is a process which implies transformative learning, according to Mezirow's framework.

On the basis of the data collected and analyzed we can therefore see the unfolding process of "coming out" starting from a disorienting dilemma (which identity should I choose as mine?) and following a sequence of reflexive steps, that leads (over time) to a reframing of one's own perspectives and to the definition of new action plans.

The data also highlight how the learning outcomes of the transformative learning process imbedded in "coming out" experiences are capitalized in terms of a new awareness and understanding, used as a personal reference and shared with others.

A further study will be extended to a larger number of individuals and will involve the construction of a stratified sample, which would help us in identifying the impact of cultural, ethnic, territorial and age differences, on the process of "coming out" and on its transformative potential.

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