

*Life Stories in a radically changing world.*  
*At the crossroads of Research, Education and Intervention*  
**International conference**  
**May 19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020**  
**Montreal (UQAM)**

**Argument**

As researchers, educators and practitioners from Quebec versed in the “life story/biography approach,” we are organizing an international bilingual (French/English) conference for the spring of 2020. We are joined by partners from Europe and the Americas. Considering the growing importance of life stories and other biographical and narrative approaches in today's world (Goodson *et al.*, 2016), we hope that this international conference will provide a unique opportunity for meetings, reflections and networking between all of these practitioners. Furthermore, we seek to provide answers to challenges facing these three types of social actors : a) practitioners implementing life story and biographical approaches in research, training and intervention), b) the subjects-actors, narrators of their life story, and c) the practitioners in training. The conference will mainly address two areas: 1) the diversity of (auto)biographical practices and the Quebec « tri-purpose model » and 2) the contribution of biographical approaches to understanding and acting in multiple social life fields in the contemporary world.

**The various practices of life story/biography and the Quebec tri-purpose model**

The Wroclaw conference<sup>1</sup> (Slowik *et al.*, in press) provided an opportunity to highlight how the Polish schools of thought developed from the Chicago School in their implementation of the life story/biographical approach. The upcoming Montreal conference will mark the heritage of the Chicago School and the unique features of Quebec practices. These practices date back to the 1970s and reached a turning point with the 1994 creation of the *Réseau québécois pour la pratique des histoires de vie*, the RQPHV. Within this network, we in Quebec have identified **three main purposes** of the practice of life stories/biography : knowledge production (research), the transformation of social reality (action/intervention) and training (adult education) - the therapeutic purpose can be located at the interface with training and intervention -.

The challenges related to the articulation of these three objectives and the unprecedented links thus created between social groups and social actors (trainers/researchers/social interveners/subjects-actors involved in their lives) have led to the emergence of diverse and multidisciplinary combinations of the three poles in adult education: research-action, training-research, practice/training rotation, *etc.*

We encourage presentations that will adopt a critical stance toward the **tri-purpose model**, by addressing the following questions: *Can the biographical approach still claim a total methodological autonomy as advocated by Thomas and Znaniecki at the beginning of the XXth century? Is it more fruitful to combine different approaches, methods and techniques? And if so, in which circumstances, according to which constraints (institutional, financial, etc.), and addressing which ethical issues? How have new technologies and new literacies transformed the life story practices?*

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<sup>1</sup> *The biographical space*. May 9-11, 2018, Wroclaw (Poland). On-line : <http://thomasznaniecki2018.dsw.edu.pl/en/>

## **The contribution of biographical approaches to understanding and acting on the Late Modern Age**

### **The Individual/Collective Dialectic**

The biographical approach has undeniably contributed to the inclusion of subjectivity and its components in the study of social life. The practice of life stories thus immediately raises the question of the **subject** and, moreover, of a subject narrating oneself (Mitchell *et al.*, 2004) and that of the social actor or, in the most current terms, of agency. *What are the most current figures of the subject, as understood by life stories/biographies? In what ways does the "self-entrepreneur" subject of neoliberalism affect the conditions of biographical work and counseling/support/coaching (accompagnement)? What are the pitfalls?* This subject is constructed by confronting gender-related issues, **identity-related issues** linked to multiculturalism - plurilingualism, generational belonging, experiences of pluri-mobility, *etc.*, in short, issues that centrally cross the experience of people who are narrating their life and, consequently, the work of researchers, educators and interveners. In addition, many of the subject-actors and social groups targeted by our research, training and interventions with life story/biography experience **recognition issues**.

Simultaneously, the practice of life stories immediately raises the question of the **collectives** to which the individual belongs, bringing us back to the individual/collective polarization that is immediately visible in life story/biography. *Are we today confronted with a society in which the individual/collective alliance is mainly focused on the singularization of the individual? With what consequences? Faced with these societal challenges, what is the contribution of adult education, for example, and how does it fit into the life stories/biographies (West et al., 2007)? How does the life story/biography work contribute to rebuilding links between the individual and groups/society/history and to reduce the gap" between the local and the global?*

### **The areas of social life**

The practice of life stories makes it possible to shed light on diverse **areas of social life and related issues**. The following subjects exemplify Quebec **contributions** : cultural diversity, immigration, mobility, marginality, spirituality, ecology, work and adult education and a growing awareness of Indigenous cultures and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in particular.

However, the *a priori* classification of our current research in specific fields seems somewhat restrictive: the fields are interrelated in the lives of people who tell their stories and in the way they are rendered. For example, the issue of marginality includes aspects of fragility, domination, oppression and the vulnerability of those recounting their stories. On the other hand, biographical work on the exercise of power in various fields can highlight various contradictions experienced by the subjects-actors.

In addition, some of our research with life stories/biographies is in areas of **innovative social action** and can therefore generate - in terms of their impact - a social recognition of their relevance.

## Multiple temporalities and the building of a better world

From the convergence between the different domains of social life emerges the perspective of a **"meta" space of knowledge of social reality** with the experience of this reality by social actors and from their narratives, **a new paradigm** foreseen at the beginning of the 20th century by the pioneers of hermeneutics and which, today, can give us access to the radical transformations of our world.

*Does the practice of life story/biography allow to reconcile temporalities (day-to-day temporality, biographical temporality and epochal temporality) that appear irreconcilable to Rosa (2010) in the social acceleration of the late modernity? Temporalities to which we could add a cyclical temporality marking decisive moments of auto-education. Can the practice of life stories help us understand these challenges of social acceleration in our democratic societies? Can it not also constitute a practice of resistance to social acceleration? Constitute a lever for emancipation in a post-colonial context of recognition of local knowledge? A contribution to "cognitive justice"? Does the practice of life story/biography still recognize itself in the rationale of empowerment?*

In addition, we are engaged in a transformation of our socio-cultural horizons (challenges related to biodiversity, cultural and linguistic diversity, *etc.*). New ventures in the production of knowledge, training and action are emerging "here and between us" (Berryman, 2005: 79) that "open up a working space with colossal stakes" (Pineau, 2005: 100). *Can life stories become the breeding ground for this?* Rosa (2018) argues, for his part, that listening is the only and essential new attitude to adopt in order to develop a better world. However, the practice of life story/biography has taught us to listen and pay attention to all areas of life! Thus, life story/biography practitioners hold some keys to contribute to a better world. *In the light of this promising idea, does it not become crucial to review our own practices and postures, to specify our intentions and the issues with which we must deal, without forgetting our own reflexivity as practitioners of life story/biography, in order for all of us to contribute to the future of this better world?*

## Official partners



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