

# Homeless: methods of producing biographical narratives

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**ABSTRACT:**

The text gives an account of a research, still under way, focused on the dynamics of socialization of adults who live or have lived on the streets. In general, it will be structured in three main levels: i) a macro, aimed at analyzing the social policies introduced in the last twenty-five years to combat poverty; ii) a meso, which will characterize the organizations working with this sector of the population; iii) and a micro, which will deal with two groups of people who live or have lived in a homeless situation. To achieve this last level, I am conducting interviews of a biographical nature with the aim of identifying the reasons that lead people to a homeless situation. In this present text — still with a methodological and explanatory slant about the theoretical architecture of the research — I reflect on the practices and processes to be taken into consideration in the collection of biographical material: the ethical questions related to the access to the field, decisions regarding selection of and meeting with the interviewees, the dynamics of the interviewee-interviewer interaction, as well as, obviously, discussing the role of the latter in the co-production of the biographical narrative.

**KEYWORDS:**

Biographical interview; Life histories; Biographical narrative; Homeless.

## INTRODUCTION

This document is the result of the work developed during the preparation for a Ph.D. degree in Educational Sciences with the specialization in Adult Education. The research deals with the processes of socialization and learning of adults who live or have lived on the streets (“homeless”)<sup>a</sup> and is structured in three guiding research principals: i) a macro level of documental nature aimed at analyzing the social policies for combating poverty implemented in Portugal as from the 90’s and the directives originating from the European Community; ii) a meso level targeted to accomplished a survey and characterization of the organizations working with the homeless in the Lisbon area; iii) a micro level which deals with two groups who live or have lived in a homeless situation. This last level of analysis is developed from the interviews, of biographical nature, with the aim of identifying the reasons leading people to the homeless situation, what makes them remain in or change this condition and the logic underlying the decisions to stay on or get off the streets.

Here we seek to reflect on the workings of the theoretical and practical aspects to consider in the collection of biographical material: ethical questions related to the access to the field and the interviewees; decisions regarding the selection of the subjects; formulation of the request to grant an interview; practical aspects regarding the date and place of the interview; the dynamics of the inter-

view; the role of the interviewer in the production of the biographical narrative.

## CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

A research is not independent of the person who is conducting it and of his/her own reference framework; it is a personal process of construction of a study object and de-construction of preconceived ideas, of simplistic ways of looking at the world and of putting into perspective the surrounding reality. The choice of this theme is owed to the voluntary work I’ve been undertaking in Lisbon since 2004 as a member of a Night Team of a Private Institution of Social Support which is dedicated to the distribution of food and aid to homeless people. This activity gave me the chance to really get to know some of the people who live on the streets or in precarious or deteriorated accommodation. Contact with this reality is very intense, whether by the sentiments awoken — pain, compassion, impotence — or by the need to understand this phenomenon which affects both individuals and groups, which is individual, social and global.

If all knowledge is always self-knowledge, as suggested by Boaventura Sousa Santos (2003), the research under development stems from the desire to know and understand this reality. The object of study was constructed with a basis of personal and direct knowledge of a complex reality, a phenomenon known as “homeless” which encounters

multiple realities: people living on the streets of Lisbon; institutions dedicated to helping them; organizations hoping to “reintegrate them into society”; reintegrated people; and an individual who is aware of this reality, analyses it and questions it. Parallel to the process of construction of the research project, was a huge personal implication in the reality of some people living on the street via lengthy conversations and more frequent meetings which engendered friendly relationships. To ignore the influence of the various interactions with these people would be to forget the whole of the “person-researcher”, the main instrument of observation and data gathering in a research which claims to be qualitative.

#### THE ETHICS OF ACCESS TO THE FIELD AND CONTEXTUALIZATION OF BIOGRAPHICAL DATA GATHERING.

Voluntary work began in August, 2004 and, since November of the same year, I have combined the roles of voluntary worker and researcher. The dialectical relationship between these two activities caused hesitation regarding the nature of this dual role of ‘spy’ and confidante, of interested party and mercenary, sometimes making me feel unworthy of the confidence entrusted in me. The question of ethics caused by this duplicity of roles was overcome to a certain extent by the verbal request for authorization made to the chairman of the organization of which I am a volunteer. But the question of ethics is not limited to authorization from the institution to enter the field of activity: how to explain my dual role to the people I am in touch with every fortnight, who feed my knowledge and fill my diary? Should they be told so that they know that I have established a link with them from a double interest? How far will this knowledge influence the development of our relationship? How to overcome this question?

For Hughs (1996), the sociologist is a member and an outsider — a member because he participates and an outsider because he observes, describes and reports. To overcome the duplicity of roles, the investigator must establish the separation and the temporal partiality, that is to say he should be a

participant in private and an observer in public, or a participant in public and an observer in private. The balance between the roles of participant and observer is the kernel of social sciences:

*“... il faut être proche de ceux qui vivent leur vie, mais il faut aussi vivre sa vie et en même temps relater ce que l’on a observé. Le problème qui consiste à maintenir un bon équilibre entre ces rôles est au cœur même de la sociologie et, de fait, de toute science sociale. (...) l’observateur se trouve pris, à un degrés ou un autre, dans le réseau de l’interaction sociale qu’il étudie, qu’il analyse, et dont il rend compte”* (pp. 276 e 278).

The various roles played in the observation/participation documented and systematized in Burgess (1991) can be classified in two categories: one relative to the participation and the other to the anonymity of the observer (Schwartz and Schwartz, quoted in Burgess). Gold, quoted in Burgess, defends the existence of a *continuum* between the role of passive observer at one extreme and active participant at the other. Between these two extremes, Gold identifies the roles of participant-as-observer and observer-as-participant.

The duplicity of the roles forced me to create a distance between the volunteer and the researcher, the volunteer belonging to the world under observation and the observer to the world of research. In contacts with the homeless, the role of volunteer is the lead role, and my actions as such are also the motive of observation on the part of the researcher.

Besides the question of being a “double-agent”, there is a second difficulty of ethical nature also referred to by Burgess (1991):

*“... even if participant observers can overcome role problems that confront them in the field, there are still unanswered questions about the ethics of reporting and publishing data that were gathered covertly”* (p. 44).

From the first time I went out with the Night Team, I felt the need to write a diary, initially with the function of verbalizing sentiments and emotions within space and time aroused by the contact of the reality of the homeless. The records suffered

alterations and, at present, I use it as a field diary. The two years of note-taking have resulted in interesting analyses from several aspects: one private regarding my own path whilst a volunteer, how I dealt with being in contact with someone else's suffering, how I survived what I considered attempts to be manipulated by certain people, or how I dealt with questions regarding the "internment" of homeless people and the relationship, often ambiguous and complex, between the technical team, the teams of volunteers and the homeless; another interesting dimension derives from the notes I take about certain people, how we relate, how friendship ties can be forged, or how to resolve conflicts, the diary contains innumerable little stories of various people whose paths I have crossed and who have also touched my own story; another dimension refers to aspects related to the organization and functioning of the institution where I am a volunteer and my role while coordinator of the Night Team; finally, there is another dimension regarding the relationships with other institutions working in the social field, how they are looked upon by the homeless, or how they relate with the institution where I work, and also focus on questions related to the social pressures on the homeless and the "struggle" for power in a public place — the street. This last dimension was not visible for the first eighteen months of contact with this reality, but is, in actual fact, a constant feature of the everyday life of the homeless, either because they are forbidden to use places where formerly there was no prohibition or because of the pressure from some institutions to put them in shelters and the appearance of a certain strain regarding the use of communal places between those "with home" and the "homeless". Who owns the streets, the gardens, the bus-stops?

#### CRITERIA FOR THE SELECTION OF INTERVIEWEES

The research being carried out has a strong fieldwork dimension and one other, more relevant to this paper, regarding the gathering of biographical information of people who live or have lived on the streets. The team in which I am a volunteer contacts 140 people, on average, every night — the number of food packages we transport. There is a

certain mobility of homeless people and, in these two years of proximity, new people have arrived, others change the place where they spend the night or their work place, or change their life-style, returning to the homes of relatives or friends, or joining the "reintegration" programmes. Each one of these people has a personal story with specific interests, distinct ways of survival, diverse relationships, different motives for staying on or getting off the streets.

The homeless are often referred to as if they were a homogenous group with characteristics in common, but what I have seen contradicts this idea. From my observations, what these people have in common, apart from their humanity, is the fact that they regularly visit the van to receive a food package. Some of the people sleep on the streets, others have a house where they live with great difficulty and there are others who only want to converse and still others who wait anxiously for their food parcel as it is the only meal they eat during the day. Some institutions which work with the homeless feel the need to categorize them according to the "problems" they seem to have: alcoholism, psychiatric disturbances, drug addiction — as they consider this the simplest method of creating replies and solutions for these people. In this universe of 140 people, I have had to establish criteria to select the interviewees and new questions of ethics have arisen. The first criterion is to do with the concept of "homeless".

The concept of "homeless" is ambiguous and there is no official definition in Portugal or in several other European countries. In 2005, the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) proposed a categorization of the various forms of exclusion regarding housing, and homelessness<sup>b</sup> is one of the four conceptual categories established by ETHOS — European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. The term "homeless" is also used to describe people who, besides living in precarious conditions, find themselves in a situation lacking at various levels: in their private life (emotional, health); professional (out of work); and/or financial (Bento, 2004; Bento & Barreto, 2002; Baptista, 2004; Pereira *et al.*, 2001). The "homeless phenomenon" is usually associated with poverty

— the lowest end on the poverty scale — and with “social exclusion” (Costa, 1998). Investigation in this area has intensified since the 80’s, first in the United States of America and then in Europe. In Portugal, the first studies were carried out towards the end of the 80’s.

In the context of this investigation, I adopted the typology ETHOS<sup>c</sup> as this is a work developed within the scope of FEANTSA and also because of the clarity of the conceptual and operational categories. Thus, the subjects selected for interview are, or have been, included in one of the conceptual categories featured in the ETHOS 2006: rooflessness; houselessness; insecure housing; inadequate housing. In relation to the time a person is considered “homeless”, certain aspects should be heeded, especially how long the person has been living in unsuitable conditions or where s/he is living at the time of the research. There are some authors who consider a person to be homeless if s/he spent the night before the research on the street, in a shelter or in a place unsuitable for living. Others consider a person to be homeless if, over a certain period — a week, a month or a year — they have spent the night in unsuitable places. I adopted the time criterion suggested by Marpsat (2003), the interviewees being people who have lived in one of the situations defined by the typology of ETHOS for a period of more than 30 days.

One other criterion established for selecting interviewees was the choice of an intelligible common language. The interviews were to be conducted by myself and recorded for later analysis. Mutual understanding and the need to communicate with ease and clarity without resorting to a third party seemed to me to be fundamental.

Besides the two criteria mentioned above (being or having been homeless and intelligible communication), I opted to interview, in the first instance, people who had maintained a close relationship, who would be willing to be interviewed and who could, in a certain way, illustrate the diversity of situations leading to homelessness. In this first exploratory phase of the research, three men were interviewed: one who has lived on the streets for a number of years; another who lived for 20 years in a homeless situation and has had a stable personal and professional life for more than two years; and a

third who came off the streets about a year ago and is at the stage of “reintegration” in one of the homes run by the organization where I am a volunteer. The strategies employed to obtain the interviews were distinct in the three cases although I am close to the three of them.

The first person contacted was Sérgio, a talkative and kind man, 53 years old who has lived on the streets for a number of years and is a “parking attendant” in a square next to a church. I avoided talking to Sérgio while I was dealing with him as a volunteer, opting for his place of work to tell him about the interview. I explained that I was a student and was looking for people who lived on the streets to interview and would like to interview him. He agreed rather uncertainly and said he would not mind helping me. We arranged for the interview for the following Sunday evening at the place where he sleeps. On the day, I went to the square, taking my recorder, the script for the interview and a packet of chocolate biscuits to give him. He said he was sorry but that day he couldn’t as he had been asked to keep watch on a car and he hadn’t been able to refuse. We postponed the interview for the following Wednesday. I returned home rather disheartened, probably he was regretting having agreed to be interviewed.

On the agreed day, when I reached the square, he was nowhere to be seen. I wasn’t really surprised, I thought that might happen. I started to think of alternatives to substitute him. I returned home and was working at the computer when I had a telephone call from an unknown number. It was Sérgio apologising for being late, but he had had an engagement. He asked if I still wanted to do the interview that night and added that Joana, a friend, would be with us. I told him I would be at the square within a quarter of an hour.

When I reached the square, I saw Sérgio’s belongings stacked at the entrance to the bank. I noticed that he had a guitar beside his sleeping bag and various other things. There was a jeep parked next to the bank. I waited a short while and a young girl who was inside got out. It had to be Joana. We introduced ourselves and I made a remark about the guitar. We exchanged impressions about Sérgio and she told me how they had met. Sérgio appeared, greeted us and we sat down. He thought



I was a journalist or was studying journalism and he had asked Joana's opinion about the interview. They asked me if I would give them the tape of the interview and I replied that I could give them the tape or a transcription of the recording. Joana would prefer the tape. Sérgio explained that Joana knew a great deal about his life, but he would like her to stay to learn more. She could not stay for the interview as she was a volunteer firefighter and was on duty that night. I explained that I was studying, what and where and Sérgio was happy that it was Educational Sciences at the University of Lisbon. I briefly explained the objective of the research and that I wanted to know why there were people living on the streets and why others had been living there but had left. Sérgio spoke a lot before starting the interview and explained that he had been woken up on Monday night and could not get back to sleep. He showed me the mobile phone he had been given. I remembered that I had a TMN card that I had never used and offered it to him. Sérgio made a point of showing me he was not "a poor little thing" and it seemed to me that he did not like being treated as such at all.

The interview began. I told him I was going to ask him a question and he could answer in whatever way he wanted. He was sitting on some cardboard and wrapped in his sleeping-bag. I was sitting on a corner of the blanket and Joana squatted against a wall until she left. She only stayed a few minutes at the beginning of the recording.

The interview went well. He opened up and revealed many things: the hardships when he was a child; his first job when he was ten years old; his mother's aversion to him; his desire to learn; his experience of the war; his life with his wife and daughter. I talked very little and when he had finished his story, Sérgio said he was feeling cold and we would have to stop. I switched off the recorder and we conversed a little. I felt like an intruder or an abuser — he had confided parts of his life and his feelings asking nothing in exchange. I thanked him for the confidence he had shown in me and left silently. There were still many questions in the air, questions about how he organized his life on the streets. Later I would have to resolve the problem and carry out another interview focusing more on the aspects of life on the streets, or get more details

about his life story. I still see Sérgio quite regularly. One of the tapes wasn't very good and when I had finished the transcription of the interview, I printed it out and gave it to him to do whatever he liked with it. I learnt that he had given it to Joana. Some time later, we talked about the interview and he asked me to interview him again because it had been very important to him and he would like to talk to me about his more recent life, that is to say his time on the streets.

The second interviewee, Tomás, is about forty years old and is working at present for the organization where I am a volunteer. I knew he had lived for some years on the streets and I asked someone who knew him well to help me by sounding him out to discover if he would be willing to be interviewed, explaining my interest in the subject. The interview was arranged several times and postponed. One Saturday evening we managed to meet where Tomás works and lives. He arrived late and so the interview began late. When I finished about an hour and a half later, I realized it was after one o'clock in the morning. The interview was different to what I had expected, although Sérgio had also been a surprise.

The third interviewee, Jorge, is 45 years old and was the first person who wanted to get off the streets with my help. I had already mentioned to him several times that if necessary, I would like to interview him. He would take great pleasure in helping me. The first interview took place on a Saturday during one of Jorge's visits to Lisbon. We met early in the morning and I took him to the Faculty. After having a cup of coffee, we went up to one of the small rooms in the attic. It was a long interview — about three hours — and we had the chance to delve into facts, feelings and emotions. A fortnight later, I interviewed him again about the three years he had lived on the streets. This second conversation took place in a public garden on a park bench.

The three interviewees agreed to talk to me and record their life stories and I promised to give them a copy of the transcript. I am in regular contact with them and it's curious that all three enjoyed giving the interviews. They feel that they are helping me and it was an interesting and gratifying experience both for them and for me.

Living on the streets in a public place implies an enormous capacity to adapt to new practical and social situations. Children educated in so-called developed societies do not learn to live on the streets. In the same way, urban areas were not conceived and constructed for the purpose of lodging! Whoever uses the streets to live in has to go through a learning process. Thus, it is important to understand the processes underlying adult socialization and learning. These conceptions are crossed by the “*life cycle*” (Canário, 1998) of the individuals, being intimately linked to his/her own biography. Charlot (1997) very well illustrates the relationship between human existence and learning processes. The author believes that man is born unfinished and the process of hominization obliges him to learn.

*“Learn in order to build oneself, in a triple process of hominization (to become a man), uniqueness (to become a unique example of a man), socialization (to become a member of a community in which values are shared and a place is occupied). (...) Birth, learning, is to enter into a set of relationships and processes which constitute a system of sense — where one can say who one is, what the world is, who the others are”* (p. 60).

What is the significance of being authors of our own lives? To what extent is our path chosen, imposed, negotiated, delayed or neglected? Since the life of each individual is the raw material for self-development, the notion of biographical itinerary has been used, grounded on the work developed by researchers who are dedicated to Life Stories as educational processes. These studies are aimed at reaching essentially two important objectives: to train trainers and research the training processes, that is to say, to answer the question — how do adults learn? The life stories have been used in this double dimension, as an educational tool and as a method of research. The more than twenty years of research and the existence of the “second generation” of researchers who have used the life stories and the educational biographies in this double dimension, allowed the compilation and dissemination of knowledge regarding adult learning processes, having their lives as a basis. This body of knowledge is a source of great wealth, as by analyzing the

life stories and the singularity of each individual’s development path, it is possible to identify certain regularities, such as: important events; social environments; influential people. Dominicé (1996) states that “*the educational biography is always an interpretation of adult life*” (p. 75) and I believe that this area of research can provide us with pertinent clues for the understanding of the way adults interpret their biographical itineraries.

Based on the extensive work on Life Stories and looking at education from the point of view of the learner, Josso (1989) points out some clues for reflection and understanding of the place occupied by experience in the formation and transformation of individual identity and subjectivity. According to the author, the dialectic challenges between the individual and the group are formative in as far as the activities, the situations, the interactions force one to reconsider or reconstruct ideas, solutions and behaviours. This strain between the individual and the group confers an “*imitative capacity of cultural models and a capacity of orientation open to the unknown*” (p. 166). The formative experiences are as much those which feed self-confidence as those which feed doubts, mistakes and self-questioning. According to the author and her experience, it is difficult to establish a correlation between the circumstances and the types of learning.

The thesis for Christine Josso’s Ph.D. degree (Josso, 1991)<sup>d</sup> was drawn up based on her educational biography. Starting with her own narrative and more than 80 educational biographies, it was possible to create categories which constitute educational processes. A first category — “Hinge Moments”— corresponds to the choices and breaches freely made, considered as “*dangerous and painful leaps*”. These moments constitute real “*learn from ruptures opportunities: breach in affective relationships; breaks in the way of life; breaks in activities; breaches in the socio-cultural context*” (p. 207). Learning from rupture makes it clear that transformations “*imply the relinquishing of certain acquisitions as much as the launching of new potentialities*” (p. 207). These moments of change oblige the author to carry out activities of adaptation to the environment, investigate new realities and create new relationships and participate in new activities. These stages were moments of self-confrontation

with the former understanding of the world and ways of being and of the integration of new constructions of sense.

*“Thus, what shaped my course were the activities, situations, events, meetings and relationships which obliged me to discover realities unknown until then and which allowed me to exercise or acquire qualities, which caused awareness, which questioned the meanings acquired or created previously and forced me to re-elaborate the meaning”* (p. 208).

Josso considers two levels of learning: the first is of four stages — initiation, acquisition, maintenance and transference. A second level arises with the accumulation of learning and is derived from the *“capacity for self-examination and clarification of what has been done to achieve the knowledge”* (p. 210), this level refers to the capacity of learning how to learn. Despite the wide variety of learning methods we have undergone during our existence, Josso considers four learning categories: psychosomatic, instrumental, relational and reflective. Learning demands that you know how to:

*“... mobilize your physical and psychic attributes, discover the properties of objects and environment, be sensitive to the qualities of others so that the subject and the means can work in harmony for success of the activity”* (p. 209).

In the category “Dynamics”, it is worth considering the transformations registered in the temporality. These transformations are sensed as challenges for people and imply a unique evolution. Josso seeks to find a category that would allow the inclusion of the dynamics that lead to the transformation — the relationships between the individual and the collective (family, group, extended society).

*“The individual-group relationships can be more or less harmonious or conflicting, but however they are lived, they show the plot of our existence, the place where we gamble our identity, where it is defined and redefined without stopping ... in a double movement of identification and differentiation. ... All the biographies I have helped to draw up or to which I had access simply to read, witness a dialectic*

*adjustment between the individual demands and the collective constraints”* (p. 214).

The dynamics found by Josso were categorized in three poles:

- Autonomization/ Acquiescence;
- Responsibility/Dependency;
- Innermost being/Outward appearance.

The tension between autonomy and acquiescence are usually experienced in relation to the family of origin, to social constraints, to traditional life-styles, to ways of thinking, to the self-image and to the relationships with others. The tension between taking on responsibility and being dependent also make their mark on the biographies, as well as in relation to the family, groups, interpersonal relationships, professional choices, being aware of the responsibility for the individual’s health, for the environment, etc. In relation to the tension between the innermost being and outward appearance, Josso states:

*“We all live a ‘double life’ with moments of tension which emerge from this bipolarity of our existence: our inner self and the way of living in relation to others. This tension is the product of a contradiction of behaviour and ideas expressed on the one hand and thoughts and feelings bottled up on the other. The moments may appear when an inner development, quite satisfactory until then, is opposed by exterior conditions and the conscience questions an inner coherence, or even in situations in which we wish to avoid open conflict, or in those moments in which others transmit an image of ourselves which we feel does not correspond to our inner self. Here also, the moments of tension are no more than the highs of an argument which is permanent throughout our existence”* (p. 216).

The category “Attitudes and qualities of the subject” is more difficult to define. According to Josso, the attitudes and qualities of the subject are more obvious at times of encounters, although they vary depending on the time. In this category, the ideas the individual has of himself stand out, between passivity and initiative, between considering himself the author of his own life, subject to limits and con-



straints, or seeing himself as a conditioned being, the result of events beyond his control and which determine his choices.

#### THE BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERVIEWER ON THE NARRATIVE

Although Josso's work aims at finding the marks of a training route, the transposition of these marks to the paths of life is acceptable and I found it useful for formulating the initial question of the interview and conducting it. Two scripts were written for the interview with a starter question and some guiding questions focusing on aspects I was interested in exploring. The starter question "*What happened in your life that made you decide to live on the streets?*" was the same for both scripts with the aim of directing the progress of the biographical narrative and selecting the most relevant episodes for the interview allowing the elaboration of the narrative and the arguments about the sense or direction and the significance of the biographical route.

Demazière and Dubar, 1999 define the investigative biographical interview as a "story or tale" which should provoke "... *une conduite de récit c'est à dire une mise en forme argumentée de son parcours*" (p. 226) and based on the recollection of events, the interpretation of them and the temporal interlocking of the past, present and future, inserting them in a story with a purpose:

*"C'est une caractéristique essentielle de la conduite de récit: l'évocation du passé implique le jugement sur le présent qui suscite l'anticipation des avènements possibles. Ainsi, comme le reconnaît d'ailleurs Greimas, la narration est "un processus créateur de valeurs"* (p. 234).

Hughes (1996) considers present day sociology to be the "*science of the interview*" in two ways: as sociologists' favourite instrument; as the very object of sociology — the interaction, "*the exchange of words and gestures*" (p. 282). For Bourdieu (1993) the interview is also an exchange, a social relationship, which is distinct from most of the others, since it has some effects on the results obtained. This interaction is marked by different expectations and roles between the interlocutors and by distinct

levels of personal implication. Hughes refers to the existence of codes which allow the definition of the intensity of expectations of various levels, from absolute imposition to equality or neutrality of roles, both having rules or conventions, clearer and more explicit at the highest level of intensity (norms and laws) and lighter at the lowest level.

The interview, as a methodology for research, has been studied by various authors from various fields of the social sciences pondering the techniques of the interview. For this document, it is essential to explore the relational component which is created between the interviewee and the interviewer, and reflect on the co-production of the biographical narrative. According to Demazière and Dubar (1999), in a biographical research interview, each participant, with distinct roles, uses language to mediate the exchange of words and the production of the narrative between them. The interviewee makes a retrospective and prospective reflection of what is important in his own life, which authors call "*travail sur soi*". The interviewer, by being an active listener, is the co-producer of the narrative

*"En cherchant à comprendre, il incite à produire des significations, il pousse à développer des argumentations, il sollicite des enchaînements, des mises en relation, des explicitations de formules qui lui paraissent obscures"* (p. 228), because he participates intellectually and affectively in the dialogue which is producing the narrative. Through introspection and dialogue "*... les narrateurs ne racontent pas leur vie mais ils mettent en scène, de manière à convaincre, le sens de leur propre parcours*" (Théry, 1994, cit. in Demazière & Dubar, 1999).

I undertook the three interviews at different times, the first two taking place in January 2006 and the third in May of the same year. The three biographical narratives produced are very different and the way in which each of the interviewees responded to the initial question shows some aspects that I would like to share in this paper: the aspects "production of the narrative biography", "work on oneself", and the "active listening" referred to by Demazière and Dubar (1999). To illustrate these aspects, the transcript of the beginning of the three interviews follows:

I: Well, can I ask the first question? What happened in your life that made you want to live on the streets?

Sérgio: To answer that question properly, I have to start by talking about myself, what I was, what I would like to have been, what has made me what I am. I don't know... I remember being baptized, I remember being badly treated by the priest because it was very cold and the water was freezing. I think I called him everything under the sun and afterwards my parents punished me with a whipping, but it was OK. It was when I was four years old, more or less. I had a simple childhood — wonderful, beautiful just like all the other kids, boys and girls. I remember my childhood a lot — I loved it. I went to primary school, like everyone else, and I always had great respect for the teachers and my friends, but always as good or as bad as them. It's true... and one of the things I loved to do was go to the school and water the donkeys.

I.: Water the what?

Sérgio: Water the donkeys. Because I lived in a village, in the village where I was born...

I.: Where was that?

Sérgio: In Vera Cruz, in Alto Alentejo, in the district of Évora. But it is a very pretty village.

I.: Did you live there with your parents and brothers and sisters?

Sérgio: With my parents and brothers and sisters in my grandparents' house. In my grandmother's house. She was the most beautiful, the most wonderful person I have ever known. She was like a mother to me! My parents always liked me — my father as much as my mother. My brothers and sisters and I always liked each other a lot, we always got on well together. Then when I was nine ... no ten, I had finished primary school when my parents came here to Malveira. We came here to Malveira on a Tuesday and I started work on the Thursday.

27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY, 2006 — INTERVIEW WITH TOMÁS

I: I'm going to put the recorder here in the middle, nearer to you. OK. I'll ask you a question and you answer. The things I don't understand very well, I'll ask. OK?

Tomás: OK.

I: Right. Then my first question is: What happened in your life that made you decide to live on the streets?

Tomás: What happened to make me come here to the streets? It was, hum ... everything has a beginning and a bunch of things made me ... it was easier for me, at first, to be on the streets. Afterwards, obviously in the long run it became quite the opposite.

I.: Why?

Tomás: It became more difficult to be on the streets than at home. It was only at the beginning that it was easier to be on the streets than at home.

I.: But, but a person goes onto the streets, just like that? Suddenly? Was it like that with you?

Tomás: No.

I.: Or are there several things...

Tomás: Several things happened...

I.: And one day you woke up and you were on the streets? Was it like that?

Tomás: No. Several things happened. There were family problems... a lot of ups and downs at home... because of my brothers, with the father who wasn't my father, with a batch of... it used to be very difficult for us, things were very much more severe. Today there is ...

I.: But where did you live? In Lisbon?

Tomás: Yes, in Lisbon...

13<sup>TH</sup> MAY, 2006 — INTERVIEW WITH FORGE

I.: Well, do you agree? I'll put the recorder here near you so that we can hear better, OK?

Forge: OK.

E.: I'll ask you a question and you answer. If I have any doubts, I'll ask...

Forge: OK.

I.: Right, then, There's just one question — What happened in your life that made you decide to live on the streets?

Forge: (Pause) What happened was that I couldn't accept what I was... I couldn't admit that I was an alcoholic, I carried on drinking every day even though I had jobs. I quit or sometimes I was fired. My last job, for example, I worked in Lisbon and rented a room. At the end of the month, instead of paying me a full month, the boss only paid half.

I.: *Why? Didn't he have any money?*  
 Jorge: *Because... he said he would give me the rest in two or three days, but as soon as I received the half of the wages, I bought the bus pass because I needed it as I lived... I had rented a room in Santo António dos Cavaleiros...*  
 I.: *Hum, and you were working in Lisbon.*  
 Jorge: *And I was working in Lisbon, near Alameda.*  
 I.: *Hum...*  
 Jorge: *And then, on a Monday.*  
 I.: *He gave you your wages on a Monday?*  
 Jorge: *No. And then, on a Monday, I got drunk. I spent more... almost half of what I had received and there was still the rest to pay for the room. As I didn't have enough to pay for the room, I ended up on the streets. I didn't have the guts to go to the landlady so all my clothes stayed in the room in Santo António dos Cavaleiros. They're still there.*  
 I.: *But, one day your boss said that he couldn't pay the rest of your wages...*  
 Jorge: *He said he would pay me later.*  
 I.: *Yes and you needed the money to pay for the room?*  
 Jorge: *Yes, I needed the money to pay for the room and it was the end of the month.*  
 I.: *Yes...*  
 Jorge: *As I didn't have any, I got drunk the day before...*  
 I.: *But when you decided... you realized you didn't have the courage...or you realized you'd spent all the money and didn't have any to pay the landlady...*  
 Jorge: *Yes.*  
 I.: *You weren't drunk? When you decided you didn't have the guts, it really was lack of courage, wasn't it?*  
 Jorge: *Yes, it was.*  
 I.: *It wasn't because you were drunk?...*  
 Jorge: *I still had a hangover.*  
 I.: *Yes, but why didn't you go back home? Was it because you didn't want to tell the landlady you had been stupid? (pause) You do understand, don't you?*  
 Jorge: *No, she'd already warned me before.*  
 I.: *Had you missed paying the rent before?*  
 Jorge: *Because I had missed once, in a previous job and she...*

I.: *The rent?*  
 Jorge: *Yes.*  
 I.: *But did you give her the money later or not?*  
 Jorge: *I gave her some.*  
 I.: *You didn't give it all?*  
 Jorge: *No, because she didn't want it.*  
 I.: *Didn't want it? Why not?*  
 Jorge: *Because she, first...now you've found another job, because in the space of four months I'd had four jobs.*

In the aspect “production of a biographical narrative”, it is important to highlight that Sérgio started his narrative with the story of his *modus vivendi*, or rather, he apparently ignored the initial question and told his “tale” from when he became aware of himself, selecting the most relevant facts in sequence: his baptism, his childhood, school, his arrival in Malveira and starting work. Tomás tried to answer the question from the beginning, looking for arguments to justify his options to live on the streets and later get off them. His narrative begins with his childhood in the context of family and social life. Jorge started the interview with a pause, as if he were searching for a single answer that would satisfy my question. He started his narrative not with his childhood but with the last job he had had before going to live on the streets.

In the aspect “work on oneself”, and based on the entire texts of the interviews, the three people interviewed made a retrospective reflection on what they considered important in their lives and which, in a certain way, answered the initial question. The excerpts reproduced here show this work of reflection in a very tenuous way. Tomás and Jorge made an effort to answer the initial question right at the beginning of the interview and, as the end coincided with the beginning, they came full circle. In Sérgio's narrative, the interview began with his baptism when he was a child and ended with today. The work in itself is also inspired by the situation of the interview, by the interaction with the interviewer and the interaction with the interviewee himself.

In relation to the “active listening” and my role as co-producer of the biographical narrative, I think that it is barely noticeable in Sérgio's narrative; his story had already been told, my interventions were

only to clarify phrases or contextualize the situations described. Tomás' narrative started by being more argumentative and less chronological, making a greater intervention on my part necessary so as to support his reasons in his personal direction. In the interview with Jorge, I believe I took on a more active role as the interviewer as his discourse was rather argumentative, seeming to seek reasons that would clarify the initial question or confirm his initial justification.

## CONCLUSION

This text tries to describe the process of gathering biographical narratives which are being carried out for my PhD in Educational Sciences, reflecting on the way the process is being achieved in the field and how the biographical narratives are produced when gathered through research interviews. Aspects relating to access to fieldwork have been discussed as also the duplicity of roles of volunteer-researcher and the associated ethical questions. The criteria for selecting the individuals have been stated and previous knowledge and affective closeness considered important as they seemed to facilitate the way the interviews were carried out as well as in the compromise and confidence they all showed towards me.

The more pertinent categories for analyzing the biographical itineraries have been referred to, having Josso's work as a basis. It was not possible to present the entire analytical results of the narratives within the scope of this work, but these categories were present in the elaboration of the scripts and in the way the interviews themselves were carried out. The excerpts presented here do not allow a global view of the three biographical itineraries, or the identification of the interlocking moments, or the dynamics, the attitudes and qualities of the subjects. The analysis of the narrative formed from biographical interviews remains open.

The interviews were arranged beforehand and all the subjects had a somewhat vague idea of the theme of the conversation and of my personal interest in this work. They consented to my request and showed concern and willingness to contribute with their knowledge and their life stories in my research. Even though it was possible to take some precautions beforehand to ensure the interviews went well, each meeting is a unique and immediate event, the decisions are made based on the previous experience of the researcher and the interests of the research. The interviewees were given a great deal of freedom to talk about their lives. However, a narrative gathered in this way is always a collective work of construction of a "tale" because, even though the interviewer takes on a listening role which is more passive than active, the questions asked, the comments raised by the narrative, the involuntary gestures of approval or distraction influence the dynamics of the production of the discourse, I mean, the selection of the more meaningful episodes, the expression or holding back of painful sentiments and emotions. The exchanges generated in this process are complex and difficult to analyze. However, I think that through the examples presented here, it is possible for us to perceive that although the initial question is common, each person has his own story, for some more factual and consecutive, from infancy to adulthood, for others more argumentative, resorting to their infancy or adulthood for reasons and explanations.

On being collected and constructed through interviews the biographical narrative is produced by the author and co-author. The former has the whole raw material, the facts experienced, felt, thought about, reflected on, altered and self-integrated. The latter is interested in the production of a narrative that serves the aims of the research. Together they build this final product, a biographical narrative which will feed the production of scientific knowledge.



## ENDNOTES

1. In Brazil, the equivalent of “homeless” (*sem-abrigo*) is “roofless” (*sem-tecto*).

2. In 2005 the category used was translated from the French “sansabri”. In 2006, FEANTSA updated this typology and was translated into Portuguese as the conceptual category of “Without roof”.

3. ETHOS — European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion “*Au cours de ces dernières années, le groupe de travail collecte de données de la FEANTSA et l’Observatoire européen sur les sans-abrisme a développé une typologie de l’exclusion liée au logement appelée ETHOS (European Typology on Homelessness and housing exclusion). Cette typologie a été lancée début 2005 et a été analysée à l’occasion de différents séminaires/réunions à l’échelon local, national et européen. ETHOS est maintenant sert de cadre pour des débats, des initiatives de collecte de données, des recherches, et l’élaboration de politiques de lutte contre l’exclusion liée au logement. Il est important de noter que cette typologie est un exercice ouvert qui fait abstraction des définitions nationales dans les états membres de l’Union européenne. ETHOS est fondé sur la notion de «home» en anglais (qui serait composé de trois domaines: logement, social, et juridique) pour créer une définition large de l’exclusion liée au logement. ETHOS classe les personnes sans domicile fixe en fonction de leur situation «de vie»: être sans abri (dormant à la rue); être sans logement (avec un abri mais provisoire dans des institutions ou foyers d’hébergement); en logement précaire (menacé d’exclusion sévère en raison de baux précaires, expulsions, violences domestiques); en logement inadéquat (dans des caravanes sur des site illégaux, en logement indigne, dans des conditions de surpeuplement sévère)”. Retrieved December 2006, from <http://www.feantsa.org/code/EN/pg.asp?Page=546>.*

4. The quotations in this work were freely translated from the original French text.

5. In the original, *récit*.

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