Migration Experiences and Narrative Identities: Viewing Alterity from Biographical Research

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ethical challenge of hosting the stranger that is implicit in the work of biographical research with migrant populations. It analyses the tasks faced by this dialogical and narrative research that is put forward both in social sciences and the Humanities. Drawing from ethnographic work conducted among different groups, the paper presents the method of biographical workshops, in which voluntary participants bring or produce testimonies about their experiences as migrants. Another goal of the paper is to analyse the radical alterity at play in the narratives of migrants and refugees. Hospitality is here understood as an ethical and civic skill that human beings can develop as a response to the hostility characterizing the general tendency of migration policies for exclusion and surveillance. The Ricoeurian concept of narrative identity is used to examine the plasticity of alterity in the methodological context of biographical research among migrants and refugees.

Keywords: biographical workshops, biographical research, migration experiences, narrative identity

1. Introduction

This paper aims at addressing the ethical challenge of hosting the stranger that is implicit in the very work of biographical research with migrant populations. It analyses the specific tasks faced by this dialogical and narrative kind of research that is put forward both in social

sciences and in the Humanities. Drawing from ethnographic work conducted among different groups[1], the paper presents the method of 'biographical workshops', in which voluntary participants bring or produce testimonies about their experiences as migrants while applying, at the same time, a (re)distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004), and a socialization of power (Ferrarotti, 2014).

By creating times and spaces of interaction and dialogue about experiences of migration, this work enables an encounter with alterity understood as a process of destabilizing monolithic conceptions of identity. Amid heterogeneous and vulnerable groups, this process highlights the intrinsic link between ethics, politics, and aesthetics in the production of knowledge about hospitality. Following the critical framework suggested by Norman Denzin, this type of qualitative research 'speaks for and with those who are on the margins' (Denzin, 2018: x). In fact, it listens to their versions of history and regimes of truth in contrast with the everyday exclusion, discrimination and silencing with which most migrants and refugees are confronted.

The theoretical premises that we adopt here articulate new developments of critical hermeneutics, namely the works of Richard Kearney and Johann Michel, with the critical qualitative inquiry that assumes a social justice agenda and sees science as being a moral discourse (like any other). Indeed, scientific knowledge is pervaded by power dynamics that are not neutral and that influence representations about it,

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which are always situated and determined by contextual politics of representations. Our choices are driven by the empirical work we have developed throughout the years and the general lack of political effectiveness to deal with the so called 'migration crisis': humanitarian crisis, inability to cherish diversity, racism and fear of the other.

The present context of international migrations is marked by the presentification in the global north of the abyssal lines (Santos, 2007) that throughout history have separated colonizers and colonized peoples in the global south. Technological developments, late capitalism and its impacts on climate, on work, transportations, as well as the industries of war and weapons, have been creating new push and pull factors for human mobility reaching millions of displaced people in the world today (IOM Report).

Global studies and Critical Theory highlight a state of exception (Agamben, 2005) and the inadequacy of the application of human rights to address such scenario. Also, in the present era of Posthumanism (Herbrechter, 2013), the definition of the human faces the consequences of late capitalism (highly sophisticated technology, and accentuated inequalities amongst citizens of the world). Together, these factors reflect an impasse in what concerns the respect of human dignity of most migrants, including at the political level of government of populations. Securitization and vigilance are the dominant features of migration policies, criminalizing the movement of vulnerable and underprivileged migrants while, at the same time, fostering surveillance businesses and their commercial and industrial derivatives. Millions of forced displaced persons are living in borders, camps, improvised communities, in a suspended time of existence that faces legal gridlocks with social consequences. Importantly, such state of exception implies the discretionary use and interpretation of international laws by governments, promoting a real necropolitics of migrations (Mbembe, 2003), and the proliferation of human disposability ('the management

of the undesirables', Agier, 2010). This happens especially in developing countries that border on mass migration zones of the globe. For the EU this represents a paradox and a contradiction between its foundational values as a political community (EU Charted Values), and the current politics of externalization of non-European citizens and criminalization of migrations. Alongside the rescues in the Mediterranean Sea by coast guards, or the humanitarian government of refugees, migration policies in the EU (like those of the USA or Australia), are militarizing territorial and symbolic borders with no positive outcome for the respect of migrants' rights and dignity. These processes, which lead to confusing global citizenship with cultural belonging, are fueled by media and commonsensical discourses that associate cultural and ethnic difference with conflict and aggression, as well as with terrorism. Racism, fear, and xenophobia are direct causes and consequences of this.

In such a scenario, the study of migrations within the social sciences and the Humanities is due to recognize the ethical challenges implicit in the analysis of these political tests and choices. Such acknowledgement entails the observation in the present of a historical repetition or *déjà vu* of the general tendency for othering the Other, that is, of relegating the other to exteriority without assuming a self-reflexive attitude capable of recognizing the reciprocity between the other and the self, and, to borrow Ricoeur's words, of considering oneself as another (contrary to identity taken as an essence). And it also implies the critical revisiting of the goals and instruments of analysis of the social sciences as sources and processes for knowledge production.

This paper addresses these challenges in two moments and one complementary note: first, there is a description of biographical workshops conducted with immigrants in Portugal to illustrate the embodied nature of identity and alterity, something we could grasp while stories

of migration were exchanged between voluntary research participants. This is complemented by a short analysis of an autobiographical booklet published by an Iraqi refugee, to highlight the radical hospitality at play in the present context of human mobilities and migrations; afterwards, we put forward an analysis of the concept of narrative identities in our research settings to demonstrate the plasticity of identities and communication, which is here seen as a condition of possibility for social cohesion and hospitability.

2. Biographical research: migration, narratives and alterity

Adopting a collaborative format based on the idea of mutuality of skills (Leray & Hamey Warou, 2014), an interdisciplinary research team from the Center for Social Studies, Coimbra University, conducted biographical workshops with groups of volunteers from many different origins who agreed to share their personal experiences and views about migrations. The biographical work groups were designed to attain a collective goal of mutual learning with participants who have a concrete experience of migration. In total, we conducted 5 biographical workshops: one with a mixed group of participants composed of men and women of different ages, professions, education levels, languages and religions from 12 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Cape Verde, China, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Russia, São Tomé, Ukraine and Uzbekistan); another group with women only (from Brazil, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Ukraine and Russia); a third with university students (from Argentina, Brazil, Cape Verde, China, Ivory Coast, São Tomé e Principe and Ukraine); a group with previous participants willing to talk about their different religions (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Messianic (Johrei), Evangelical, Baptist, Mormon, Muslim, Spiritism and Candomblé); a group of foreign students living in dormitories (to talk about university housing).

Each working group of volunteers had previously learned about the project, its aims, processes, and milestones in presentation meetings and public sessions (Coimbra Community Library). They met the team members and formally authorized the use of the material that was to be produced. Here, all participants agreed to voice their stories and personal accounts out loud in the group setting, where narratives were spontaneously produced in Portuguese about their lives as migrants in Coimbra. Through guided conversations and autobiographical written texts following the motto 'I came to Portugal', each participant narrated his/her decision to leave their homes, their voyage to Portugal, route of migration and daily lives in Portugal. At first, participants did not know each other and only some of them were acquainted with the team researchers. Together with our team composed of researchers from the social sciences and the Humanities, migrants from a number of different origins living in Coimbra (12 different nationalities) debated topics like racism, discrimination, gender, work, housing, etc. drawing from their biographical experiences and testimonies.

Each workshop lasted three full days (from 10 am to 6 pm) in which all participants spoke and listened to each other's experiences of migration in a circle. Following a clearly established protocol for the three days (Lechner, 2012), after reaching an agreement on its guiding rules, groups started in the morning with a listening exercise in which all participants closed their eyes for 5 minutes and were invited to listen carefully to what happened during that time. Each person then spoke about their inner experiences during the listening exercise, sharing them with the group. This starting exercise is used in order to enable a type of listening that is less judgmental and more anchored in the body – respectful of differences, producing a feeling of equality, despite different social statuses and the diversity of shared experiences and values. Even if situational, this corresponds to a relevant experience for participants who are usually discriminated or left aside and

marginalized in society. Also, by sharing the thoughts, feelings and emotions experienced during the listening, the group starts to create its own identity, participants start to know each other in a deeper level, and the practice of dialogue is fueled. This corresponds in practical terms to a 'redirection of attention' (Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch, 2003), that enables an extra-everyday life awareness about the immanent ability of perception that is absent most of the time from mundane interactions.

Having been trained in this kind of work, the team coordinator facilitated the group exchanges and 'orchestrated' the communications. The fact that participants told their stories for the first time in a group of attentive listeners produced three effects relevant to understand alterity at work through biographical research: raising awareness, building recognition and pushing towards social transformation (at a local or situational level, at least). In very concrete ways, this group work allowed the deployment of new meanings related to the lived experiences of narrators, the exercise of a new skill of self-presentation and the articulation in words of what was once silenced. Most migrants actually experience migration as a biographical disruption, a source of solitude and sorrow. By producing audible narratives about those experiences, participants learn about themselves and become aware of the collective dimension of their situation (their rights, vulnerability, possibilities for civic participation). Biographical accounts foster reflexivity, self-observation and self-distancing, producing self-acknowledgement and validation, a kind of empowerment that is extremely relevant among migrant populations. Moreover, when the accounts are produced in groups, they enact a socialization of power (Ferrarotti, 2014), and intercultural dialogue that are formative of new conviviality and social interactions.

These effects resonate with the analysis proposed by Richard Kearney concerning the carnal hermeneutics of alterity. Affirming that

acknowledgement is the combination of knowledge and affect, the Irish philosopher defends a bodily anchored interpretation of the world, of oneself and the others. Being is interpreting, no interpretation is neutral or universal, and touch itself is already protolinguistic, a kind of basic hermeneutic tact comprised of alterity (Marcelo, 2017: 5). In this sense, narratives and narrative exchange are needed to meet the other and to be hospitable. Narrative productions are a *sine qua non* for social transformation in what concerns hospitality (a first ingredient for its effectiveness), and, at the same time, they enact the intrinsically shared humanity of knowledge and affect.

Furthermore, given that participants share their experiences in a group, they learn with one another, about other cultures, other ways of experiencing migration, of being in the host country and different forms of expressing those experiences. Such sharing is a lesson of respect, and the knowledge originating from the group work is not without relevant consequences for the whole group: it has strong impacts on the participants' lives, transforming their ways of seeing and understanding migration itself. Indeed, the formative dimension of this work is then also already transformative given the awareness that it brings to participants who are usually socially associated with isolated groups and cultures in host societies. In this sense, biographical workshops function like laboratories of intercultural dialogue where different cultures, languages, religions and values have the opportunity to be in confrontation in a positive-constructive way. It is in the political weight of these stories, experiences and exchanges that we find the potential for social change of biographical research, and the biopolitics of migration at work at the level of human interactions. There is a 'formative art of existence' (Pineau, 1996) in the work with life stories and biographical accounts which is personal and collective at the same time, as the personal is always political somehow.

In this sense, biographical research necessarily implies a multi-scaled type of analysis that focuses on private accounts to address meso and macro questions relevant to the issue of migration in society and for public policies. The workshops deepen the microanalysis of the biographical data produced without overlooking the larger historical and political structures. The latter are implicit in the personal accounts, conditioning the trajectory of migrants' lives, as well as the way the stories are told by them. Also for that reason the impact of narrative exchange goes beyond mere psychological effects on the self, and reaches relevant aspects of life within communities and in society in general. Based on that, biographical research might apply different techniques of life storytelling, and narrative production, building social cohesion and new identities/identifications out of self-reflection, inter-cultural dialogue and mutual learning. Both during those processes and at their end, this research process contributes to a concrete practice of mutual hospitality (not in geographical terms but rather in ethical and social ones, as the welcoming of alterity), peace building (or at the very least it fosters intercultural dialogue), mutual recognition and, in the case of our projects, to migrants' participation in the production of knowledge.

Another source of embodied knowledge relevant for understanding and learning hospitality not in abstract terms but as a practice is the work on autobiographical texts written by those who endured an experience of migration or refuge. A short autobiography published by Daud, a young Iraqi refugee relocated in Portugal[2] is a good example of this kind of testimonies, which can be analysed and understood as a symbolic life where a radical experience can be transmitted and signi-fied to others. The incommensurability of experiences observed

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[2] Daud Al Anazy, From Mosul to Alfeizerão in 6000 words. Self-published book, 2016, Portugal.

between a refugee who almost died in a shipwreck, and a European citizen who knows little about the war from afar by the news, draws the line of separation and contact between two very different experiences of the world and the historical present. Even if one can imagine the desperation and suffering caused by a wreckage, one cannot *grasp it* – as a lived experience –from an abstract perspective.

The testimony written by Daud with the help of his Portuguese teacher was published to leave a trace of his hard journey, and to inform public opinion, in detail, about what is being done as well as what remains to be done in the welcoming of refugees in Portugal. The small volume has nine chapters describing his reasons for leaving Mosul and the circumstances in which he left, the tortures and prison inflicted by Daesh, his journey to Syria, his brief stay in Turkey, the shipwreck and survival in the Aegean Sea, the refugee camp in Idomeni, the arrival at Lisbon, and first days in Alfeizerão (located an hour north of Lisbon). In simple and clear writing, this self-published booklet contains resilient accounts of the terrible experiences Daud underwent. All through the short chapters, readers can learn about his stimulus to write down such experiences, his editorial choices (why he opted for a version that is not the full story, not covering his more recent days). Also, it includes reflections that bring a collective dimension to his narrative. He calls his own story a testimonial and includes in his account some questions and comments that highlight the radical dimension of the reported experiences: feelings of hope and despair, episodes of violence and inhumanity, states of alienation – all of them bringing significance to his new life.

This autobiographical narrative shows how Daud is a survivor, in the sense suggested by Giorgio Agamben for his definition of testimonial and the witness. According to Agamben (1999), the witness personifies a surviving history that he or she can tell from the particular position of the one who almost died. The young Iraqi's text offers a

poignant description of the wreckage he survived in the Aegean Sea, 'the longest, most difficult and simultaneously most fortunate hours of my life' (Al Anazy & Franco: 47). Other refugees in the water around him were drowning. A boat float kept him bobbing on the surface waiting during long hard hours for rescue or death – together with two young children separated from their parents who grabbed another flotation device nearby. Eventually the coast guard arrived in time and saved them from hypothermia, hunger and exhaustion. Those were 'hours, minutes without end, along which all my life was questioned and totally emptied' (Id.: 49). Daud was the last one to be saved.

When he found himself on land, he saw everyone who had escaped that nightmare 'crying, laughing, as if not believing that they were there, alive, and saved' (51). He describes his feelings in Portuguese: 'There was nothing left. There was nothing left […] only life had stayed. Life to conquer again, from scratch, from nothing' (52).

The very work of autobiographical writing, describing and reflecting about a radical experience, amounts to a work of mourning that resignifies the previous threatening situation, which very likely caused trauma and an inability to speak due to this psychological injury. It is important to stress here that such a narrative brings to the fore, and to the realm of human communication, a truth that is apparently impossible to share with the host (incommensurability of experiences). But as much as the weaving of a biographical narrative reinvigorates the life of the survivor after trauma, it also enables the listener to learn how to acknowledge that other truth, that other perspective on the world and History. This is a crucial aspect that provides a material, substantive content to radical recognition since the request for a self-narrative from a refugee creates the possibility to build bridges between two opposite worlds: that of the newcomer, the asylum seeker, and that of the host, the one who sees the strangers coming with fear or anxiety. Furthermore, the impact of weaving a self-narrative that

gives visibility to a personal, radical experience of survival, is not the same for its author and the community of listeners or readers. The one who weaves a story of survival is the author of an account testifying a radical experience out of an existential threat, while the person who listens or reads such testimony is responsible for the recognition of the singularity of that experience, but also for the ethical/civic action needed to restore a common humanity between the two. The work of (re)creation after destruction (even if only symbolic) has personal and collective impacts that might make a difference in the way host countries welcome newcomers.

3. Dialogues on migration and narrative identities

In biographical workshops participants have the occasion to produce first-person accounts about their migration experience, telling their stories in a group where, through a respectful listening, they can learn about their own self and about others. As narratives are appropriated during the research process, stereotypes, representations and fixed identities are replaced by mutual curiosity and dialogue. This happens as alterity is experienced at the very moment of a dialogue in which narrative production takes place in a space of mutual exchange of narrative identities.

In order to make sense of what truly happens in these workshops, it is helpful to draw some philosophical insights, namely those that stem from hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur's philosophy (1990) is here a source of methodological and theoretical inspiration, particularly to shed some light on the notions of identity and alterity at play during the workshops. His reflexion about the hermeneutics of the self, and particularly the concept of 'narrative identity', has a practical impact on the understanding and definition of biographical research. In fact, this concept presents an alternative to the essentialization of identities, without succumbing to the extreme opposite that would deny personal

identity. Narrative identity, in this sense, is simultaneously a useful concept for theorizing migration experience and a methodological tool for knowing the stranger that is looking to be hosted. Other social scientists, like Michel (2012), who is also a philosopher, have already shown that using the hermeneutic concept of narrative identity as a methodological tool can be useful – in his case, by exploring the significance of a given event, the Algerian war, in the construction of the narrative identities of the descendants of people who witnessed it.

Both Michel (2012) and Kearney (Marcelo, 2017) concur in showing that there is a certain plasticity in this sort of identity, insofar as this kind of identity is somehow open, with imagination playing a fundamental role. On the one hand, as Kearney suggests, hosting the other is a wager and an ethical decision, that of turning hostility into hospitality. On the other hand, as Michel points out, this sort of identity is partially co-created by the hermeneutical act of exchange and dialogue itself. This is to say that sometimes it is the very sharing of the testimonies that helps to make sense of one's own identity. This process can thus be fostered by the researcher him or herself, which grants him or her an added level of responsibility. But to understand how this is possible, one needs to see what type of identity we are talking about here.

In broad terms, the hermeneutics of the self establishes a fundamental distinction between two identity forms: identity as *sameness* (idem-identity) and identity as *selfhood* (ipse-identity). The difference resides in their respective temporalities or permanence in time: while idem-identity presents itself most of the time as having relatively stable traits recognized by others, like psychological and physical qualities, ipse-identity depends on the action or, more precisely, on an agent who makes and keeps a promise over time. That is, in ipse-identity, recognizing is less due to certain characteristics than to an (ethical) action that takes place in response to a summoning coming

from the other. Idem-identity is a way to answer the question 'what am I?', while ipse-identity is a way to answer the question 'who am I?' (Étienne, 1997).

Asserting ipse-identity is fundamental to the Ricoeurian hermeneutics of selfhood as it counters any abstract attempt to pinpoint in a purely reified way the objective attributes that would provide someone a stable identity. According to Ricoeur, identity in the sense of ipseity is also defined by a subject who actively keeps his or her word even when circumstances change. To keep one's word means necessarily to keep it *to someone else*; a promise is always made to others. As such, it is necessarily relational. Here, the constancy of the self means being faithful to the word that has been given to others – even if this 'other' is a future 'I' (or the open possibility for identity change).

By telling one's story or biographical account a conciliation between these two dimensions of identity takes place (Atkins, 2004). Narrative identity combines *idem* and *ipse*, that is, the stable traits recognized by others and the active and ongoing process implicit in any narrative production. Transformations may be revealed, resignifications happen, showing how identity is permeable to its own redefinition. As such, the notion of narrative identity overcomes at the same time an essentialised image of the self, and an idea of complete dispersion and depersonalization.

Identity and narrative are inseparable. Narrative strikes a balance between the constancy and change that constitute the self. We need to tell stories in order to construct ourselves, through narratives that bring significance to life experiences and to the world. Accordingly, it is accurate to say both that we *have* stories and that we *are* stories, at the same time. Narratives are both content and form, they are performative, creating selves and social landscapes at their own image. Narratives are language and discourse thus producing the world and worldviews that either create exclusion and incapacity to recognize

alterity (that is, alterity in oneself or in others), or openness and permeability to difference.

The production of narratives about migration experiences is a concrete model of the dialectic between the permanent and impermanent aspects of identity. The experience of migration is an opportunity (both for migrants and hosts) for self-redefinition and for alterity to be understood as openness to difference, as hospitality. Migration challenges both migrants and hosts to revise cultural identifications, showing what is fundamental to them and what can be negotiated and appropriated. The ways one can tell these stories of migration can highlight what matters in terms of a sense of belonging and the capacity to embrace the stranger in oneself and the other.

Listening and understanding migrants' narratives through the concept of narrative identity unveils the *ipse* dimension of their identity, which is so frequently unnoticed in the accounts of migrants' lives. Understood under a homogeneous category and often described by fixed characteristics, such as vulnerability and difficulties in adapting, migrants hardly ever are the authors of the stories and narratives about themselves. However, ipse-identity reminds us that there is always a process behind a certain feature or, in other words, that there is always a story to be told that recontextualises what is seen. If one is able to listen to these stories more carefully, one can see that there is agency and skills where only passivity was socially or politically perceived.

Narrative identity, and particularly its ipse-dimension, shows that the other is intrinsic to any identity and that there is a fundamental reciprocity that could be acknowledged in every description. According to Buber (2012), at an ontological level, every relation with another is reciprocal. Thus, to have an opportunity to tell one's own story can transform the ways humans see themselves and others.

Furthermore, telling stories and listening to them implies a responsibility (Lechner, 2018) that is both individual and social.

According to the hermeneutics of the self this responsibility means being capable to respond to the other and the necessity to be held accountable and hold others accountable (Haker, 2018). In the work of social sciences and the Humanities, such responsibility lies also in the interpretations and descriptions provided by researchers. An alleged neutral discourse (which is impossible anyway) *about* the research participants, not truly interested in listening to them, actually reproduces and reinforces misjudgements and exclusions, not only in its discursive repertoires but also in its conceptions of migration as a social phenomenon experienced by real people. Consequently, such 'neutrality' creates a self-representation discourse (even if implicit and undeliberated) about the social sciences as 'scientific', i.e., representing reality in an a-political way, deprived of moral responsibility, and of historical sedimentation. This is obviously a morally charged position that contributes to support and legitimate the present context of international migrations and policies, because it does not question it. Paying attention to narrative identities, on the contrary, implies a critical reflexivity of the very research process at several levels: personal (participants and team), epistemological (research methods and tools), and conceptual. No positioning is neutral and when it comes down to working with and about life narratives or experiential knowledge, researchers have to recognise their ways of listening and reproducing: i.e., this entails assuming a politics of cognition that is always also, at the same time, a politics of recognition.

Assuming that there necessarily is a politics of cognition and recognition in the very work of biographical research emphasises the ethical dimension of knowledge production and alterity along the biographical research process. This process actively integrates the participants as subjects of knowledge, as citizens of the world that are able to produce narratives about themselves and about migration. Knowledge is embodied. As such, first-person perspectives are

necessary to understand the 'scientific' topic under consideration if we really want to know how social actors live their migratory experiences.

By (re)discovering their agency and their creative capacities, participants can contribute in a more active way to elaborate discourses about migration, and fight an injunction for passivity and non-participation, for subalternisation. That is not only a major contribution to the production of knowledge; it is also a redistribution of the 'author's rights', a socialization of power, with ethical, personal, and political effects. If migrants are often described by the media (and also by academia) from an abstract and dehumanized perspective, the narrative identities that emerge in the biographical workshops are a tool to resist the denial of personal and irreplaceable experiences. On the other hand, an analogous experience can happen for those who listen to the stories told: their identities can also be reviewed in light of their response to others. Are they welcoming and respectful or suspicious and self-defensive?

As Ricoeur (1990) points out in his reflection on ethics, our relationship with others is, at same time, reversible and marked by irreplaceability. It is reversible because the speech roles alternate: the pronouns 'I' and 'you' designate different people each time depending on who utters them. Such reversibility is the starting point for recognizing, in equal terms, the value of the experiences of the other. A dialogue implies the ability to admit that the other is as capable as we are to say 'I'. However, the reversibility of roles paradoxically points to the fact that people are irreplaceable. The 'I' who speaks has a corporeal inscription and cannot be replaced without a profound and irreparable loss in discourse.

Accordingly, biographical narratives are here essential to the production of knowledge about migrations since there is a dimension of the migratory phenomenon that can only be apprehended from the point of view of an 'I', which cannot be replaced by any other

perspective. But biographical narratives are essential to ethics, too. Recognizing the reversibility of roles and irreducibility of personal perspectives is at the core of an ethical attitude, since the 'other' can be understood as an 'I' (to evoke once again the formula that gives title to the work by Ricoeur: oneself as another).

Accordingly, biographical workshops can overcome the apparent distance between 'my experiences' and those of others. Despite the fact that experiences narrated by others are not identical to mine, they can be understood as having the same value. Taking into account the interlocutors' narrative identities allows everyone in the group to recognize a fundamental community in these narratives, although they may be different or not even comparable. This basic community does not compromise the singularity of experiences, nor belonging to other communities.

Therefore, biographical workshops trace a common ground of respect and interest and, at the same time, highlight the singularities, in an apparently paradoxical effect. Thanks to the same gesture, participants can create a sense of collective belonging, simultaneously valuing personal experiences and differences between them. The emergence of mutual recognition does not hinge on an identification with uniform categories or some other homogeneity criteria, but rather on reciprocal respect.

Through gathering people from different countries, with distinct cultures and unique personal histories, biographical workshops can create a common interest in migratory experience which for authors like Bruno Latour (2004) is an epistemological criterion to distinguish 'good' from 'bad' science. Individual narratives become 'versions' of the same experience, all of them legitimate even if extremely different from each other.

The idea of 'version' points here to the work of Stengers, Despret et al (2014). These authors describe this notion by recalling its original

meaning, i.e., as an exercise of translation. A version is a translation from a foreign language to a mother tongue. In order to produce a version, translators will produce and sustain entirely different texts depending on their origins, but also on the choices each one will make during their work. During the process, they will realise that there are multiple ways to accurately accomplish the task. In other words, there is not only one standard model for responding to the problem. Nonetheless, all translators have a common problem, despite the diversity of possible responses. The original text is, for all of them, a foreign one. Their versions depend less on fidelity to a norm than on creativity and invention in the face of a common problem, that each one can respond to in very different ways (Ricoeur, 2003). Differences in versions are a fruit of personal responses to a common challenge.

Versions are the effects of this (co)respondence (or collective response) to a problem that presents itself as a point of departure to common work. In this case, singularities and differences are not obstacles to work, but a desirable result. In biographical workshops, there is an analogous production of versions, in which a group can work together thanks exactly to their differences and individualities. As the concept of narrative identity itself suggests, 'personal' and 'collective' are not opposed terms here. The emergence of narrative identities in biographical workshops enables the fabrication of the group as such[3]. One important effect among migrant populations is that 'a common ground' is created, with the contribution of all, making the problems and questions brought by the workshops ingredients of that collective work.

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[3] In a research-intervention work in the mental health field (Renault, 2015; Melo, Schaeppi, Soares & Passos, 2013), we designate this emergence of a really collective dimension in a group as a "contraction of a group", indicating that groups are constructed and not an immediate consequence of reunited people or a mere result of assembling different individuals. It demands the sharing of a common interest.

As suggested by Stengers, Despret et al (2014) in another context (namely feminine presence in Academia), narratives about extremely personal stories can attain collective significance, and display a political dimension in what was previously lived as an individual problem. Thus, problems as isolation or difficulties in adaptation lose their exclusively private nature. They are no longer attributed to an essentialized identity of the 'migrant' (in this case), or seen only as a psychological characteristic of an individual, but an expression of a social problem. In his book *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), Axel Honneth suggests that the passage from the individual experiences of suffering to a collective experience of resistance in the context of a social group formation, depends on the way individual experiences are recognised as being typical to a whole group. This recognition, in turn, depends on the capacity to communicate in order to identify such commonly shared experiences, and even political resistance to oppression, for Honneth, hinges on the creation of bonds of reciprocal esteem among the members of the group (Honneth, 1995: 128). In biographical workshops, these problems can be understood in their relational aspects, questioning not only the migrant him/herself, but also the host society and, in a larger perspective, collectively produced identities (stereotypes, preconceptions) under scripts/storylines, in which not all subjects have the same opportunity to become narrators.

The emergence of the political dimension of the migratory question in biographical workshops follows the creation of a sense of community in the group. Personal experiences, seen so far as uninteresting to some interlocutors (or the participants themselves), become relevant narratives. The concept of narrative identity enables us to understand this phenomenon insofar as it describes a non-essentialized identity, in an ongoing process that, at the same time, is radically personal. As authors of their own narratives, workshops' participants can rediscover their capacity to act and to be recognized in their singularities

and communalities. Furthermore, their stories question pre-established plots, bringing up pertinent political, cultural and existential discursive provocations. When put in political terms, these problems can also find political and collective solutions, calling for awareness and co-responsibility.

4. Conclusion

In the contemporary scenario of international migrations, hosting the stranger is a practical and theoretical challenge with moral and social consequences. In face of the general attitudes towards migrants (political and discursive), which are based on fear and exclusion, it is evident that times and spaces to a hospitable encounter with alterity are needed if one does not want to be complicit with the humanitarian crisis we are witnessing. In this context, biographical research represents at the same time an occasion to produce accurate knowledge about migrations – considering the irreplaceable point of view of migrants themselves –, and an ethical exercise of dialogue and respect.

Biographical workshops highlight *narrative identities* that underline migration experiences. This Ricoeurian notion acts a reminder that alterity is intrinsic to any identity; that agency and responsibility are direct consequences of understanding identity through the analysis of personal narratives. Because of the inseparability between narratives and ethics, telling stories is a way to (re)consider the self and others in more equitable ways. Biographical workshops are based on a participative approach that is also an ethical and epistemological position. It contributes to a critical reflexion about identity and responsibility that includes not only the research participants, but also researchers and a potentially larger audience, through the work of publicising the research. The creation of narratives about migration is a common challenge that invites collective responses.

On the other hand, the autobiographical narratives that migrants and refugees might produce about their experiences, in private (informal conversations, biographical interviews), or public spaces (media, social networks, editorial publications like a self-published book), can provide the intellectual and emotional contact between the two different world experiences of narrators and their readers/listeners. In this encounter it is possible to build a bridge between the incommensurability of such experiences, fostering a mutual knowledge between their respective regimes of truth and encouraging an understanding of the larger contexts behind the causes of migrations.

Precisely because these encounters (or their symbolic impossibilities) put together radically different worldviews and experiences, it is necessary to engage in a philosophical debate about identities and alterity. This paper considers an endeavour such as the carnal hermeneutics of Richard Kearney – a project that inscribes itself along a whole hermeneutical tradition within the social sciences and the Humanities –, helps to define the contours and contents of the meaning associated today to the idea of hospitality. And it concludes that the possibility for radical hospitality implies the recognition of the blind spots that are part of any identity: identities (including cultural identities) are not solid and pure substances that must be preserved from contamination, they are always already complex and hybrid compositions of narratives, discourses, practices, and representations built over time – a constant response to the presence of others, to alterity.

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