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## *Exploring agency, learning and identity in women's life trajectories in United Kingdom and Italy*

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*Exploración de la agencia, el aprendizaje y la identidad en las trayectorias de vida de las mujeres en el Reino Unido e Italia*

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## **Abstract**

The ways in which women aged 50, in two different cultural contexts (United Kingdom and Italy), narrate and portray turning points in their life course illuminate the relationships between identity, learning and agency that develop through work, family and life experiences. For the UK sample, the data sources are 31 semi-structured interviews, including drawings representing the life course, selected from the national longitudinal study “Social Participation and Identity” deposited in the UK Archives Data. For the Italian sample, the data sources are 28 semi-structured interviews and drawings, based on the same selected items of the UK interviews and provided by women living in the North-East of Italy. A qualitative comparative approach is used in analysing the data. This study shows how women's representations of their life course and of turning points in their lives reveal different propensities to reflect and learn from their own lives. The comparative perspective considers these life sources as situated in their cultural, relational and social contexts and reveals variations in ways these women are enabled or restricted in moving their lives forward.

*Key Words:* Agency; Adult Learning; Identity; Life Trajectories; Women's Trajectories

## **Resumen**

Las formas en que las mujeres de 50 años, en dos contextos culturales diferentes (Reino Unido e Italia), narran y representan momentos decisivos en su vida, ilustran las relaciones entre la identidad, el aprendizaje y la agencia que se desarrollan a través del trabajo, la familia y las experiencias de vida. Para la muestra del Reino Unido, las fuentes de datos han sido 31 entrevistas semiestructuradas, incluyendo dibujos que representan el curso de la vida, seleccionados del estudio longitudinal nacional “Participación Social e Identidad” depositado en los Archivos de Datos del Reino Unido. Para la muestra italiana, las fuentes de datos han sido 28 entrevistas semi-estructuradas y dibujos, basados en los mismos elementos seleccionados de las entrevistas en el Reino Unido y proporcionados por mujeres que viven en el noreste de Italia. Se utiliza un enfoque comparativo cualitativo para analizar los datos. Este estudio muestra cómo las representaciones de las mujeres de su curso de la vida y de los puntos de inflexión en sus vidas revelan diversas propensiones a reflejar ya aprender de sus propias vidas. La perspectiva comparativa considera a estas fuentes de vida como situadas en sus contextos culturales, relacionales y sociales y revela variaciones en las formas en que estas mujeres son habilitadas o restringidas en mover sus vidas hacia delante.

*Palabras clave:* Agencia; Aprendizaje de Adultos; Identidad; Trayectoria de Vida; Trayectorias de Mujeres

## 1. Introduction

Transitions and turning-points in youth and in adult life are markers of diversification for the life course, opening up new opportunities as well as challenges. Longitudinal and comparative research studies have started to uncover how changing demands are negotiated in adult life and in contrasting socio-economic landscapes (Field *et al.*, 2009; Evans, Weale and Schoon, 2013). The need for improved understandings of biographical negotiation in adult life connects directly to questions of how adult learning might be enhanced. In this article we consider women's life trajectories and, in particular, what the processes that involve the exercise of agency and learning mean for identity development in mid-life, in the contrasting cultural contexts of the United Kingdom and Italy.

Comparative perspectives can give some sense of the social regularities in adults' perspectives and how these relate to their socio-economic context and past experiences. Agency in adult life, understood as the capacity "to exercise control over one's functioning and over environmental events" (Bandura, 2001, p. 11) operates through meso-level engagements in and through the social world, the environments, and institutional practices of everyday life in changing social, landscapes (Elder, 1994).

Research into the ways in which life-chances are shaped by structures of opportunity and risk has been increasingly influenced by theories of reflexive modernization. Reflexive modernization refers to a condition in which the growth of knowledge "forces decisions and opens up contexts for action". It is assumed that individuals are released from the chains of social structures, and that they must "re-define their context for action under conditions of constructed insecurity" (Beck, 1998, p.85). Learning in adult life is held to provide avenues for people to improve their life chances actively by taking control of their lives' building capabilities, changing direction and overcoming setbacks (Aspin, Chapman, Evans & Bagnall, 2012).

This article examines the ways in which women aged 50, in two cultural contexts narrate and portray turning points in their life course, giving particular attention to the relationships between identity, agency and learning. Women's accounts of their lives represent their identifications and dimensions of self as well as their motivations, beliefs and attitudes towards learning and their own capabilities to achieve in and through learning (Kirpal, 2011), through work and in life experiences. Orientations towards work and career, similarly, comprise complex sets of motivations, beliefs and attitudes rooted in actual life experiences and social structuring of the life course. Their orientations can also change according to specific experiences of success or failure, opportunities or setbacks at any stage. We consider theories of life course (Heinz, 2001) and, in particular, approaches with relevance to the study of women at the age of fifty, assumed as an age of specific transitions in the life course (Sugarman, 1986; Stewart *et al.*, 2001). The idea of agency as the ability to give direction to one's life is pervasive in the economic and social sciences and in humanities, yet frameworks for understanding human agency are dispersed. A comprehensive understanding of human agency and the multiple influences on the acting individual begins with recognition that the life course is profoundly affected by macroeconomic conditions, institutional structures, social background, gender, and ethnicity, as well as acquired attributes and individual resources such as ability, motivation, and aspirations.

For the concept of agency to be further elaborated in ways that inform research, practice and policy we also need deeper insights into the agency involved in taking action, how these agentic beliefs are developed, what drives them and how they are related to dispositions of people to act in particular ways. According to Evans (2002; 2007; 2009) and Biesta *et al.* (2011), agency is a bounded and reflexive process that gives direction to life and is exercised through, rather than in, different environments. Also, biographical learning perspectives (Tedder and Biesta, 2007; 2008; Goodson, 2013) show how narrative-in-action enables the research participants to negotiate and to make claims about different life events and about life course. The life experiences and women's representations of them also reflect cultural norms and expectations about the adult life course, particularly with respect to gender roles and relationships. The expression of bounded agency in a life course perspective is a temporal process. Biographically produced positions are present in decisions and action-taking in the contingencies of the present moment. This temporally embedded agency can be individual or collective. Past experiences as well as possible futures can be reflectively reformulated and re-imagined. Bounded agency, as previous comparative studies by Evans have shown, also expresses itself in the social landscape through the dynamics of multiple, interlocking socio-biographical journeys in a social terrain. This relational and temporal approach makes a conceptual advance in connecting changing social conditions and individual lives. It goes beyond the core assumption of the life course paradigm in which developmental processes and outcomes are shaped by the life trajectories that are reflective of their time, by examining the multiple flows of influence that are always relational, sometimes reciprocal and may be mutually reinforcing or limiting. The development that takes place through the exercise of human agency is not that of the self-propelled autonomous individual but, rather, relational, historically embedded and biographically produced. What binds us also contains affordances that enable us to think, feel and act.

## **2. Research And Methods**

Comparative studies can be broadly divided into two categories —micro, and macro—. In this inquiry, micro-level analysis has sought to explain phenomena in terms of the expressions of agency embedded in individual women's reflections on experiences and turning points in their lives. This micro-level comparative analysis has a macro-causal dimension (Ragin 2008) as the macro becomes visible in different ways through the lens of the micro: the micro examples of biographical negotiation are more than examples of macro forces in action. They contain manifestations of gender regimes in action.

The methodology is designed to explore the narrative and symbolic representations of the participants' life course. We aim to understand implicit meaning embedded in the narratives and sketches (Mattingly 2007) Our goal is to show the relationship between agency, learning and identity, and to explore the cultural roles and expectations reflected in women's mid-life representations in the two countries considered.

The first data source is the set of 220 interviews conducted with respondents in England, Scotland and Wales at the age of 50, from the "Social Participation and Identity" project deposited in the UK Data Archives From this study, which is part of the wider longitudinal research National Child Development Study investigating the biographies of people born in one specific week on 1958, we have chosen the female sub-sample of 110

semi-standardized interviews, covering five main topics: neighbourhood and belonging, cultural participation, friendship and family, life stories and identities. Respondents were asked also to choose, from eight life course diagram, the drawing best picturing their life trajectories or to sketch their own representation. We have focused on the last two main topics of the interview, and we have selected the 31 interviews in which women have drawn a diagram representing their life course.

The second data source is a set of 28 interviews, based on the same items of the UK interviews, and correspondent 28 life course drawings provided by Italian women of fifty years old, living in the North East of Italy, in the Veneto shire, an area with important cities like Venice, Padua, Treviso and Vicenza.

Using a comparative approach (Fairbrother, 2014), in this article we compare eight narratives and drawings, by four Italian women and by four British women. The cases are not selected for representativeness but according to the predispositions of the women to share their stories and have a personal engagement in the narrative interview process. As Barrett (2006) notes, narrativists working intensively with small numbers of cases usually select carefully on the basis of rapport and personal engagement in the process as qualities that are of greater importance than strict representativeness. Women selected for this analysis from the wider UK NDCS interview sample are those who prefer to draw their own representation rather than select from 'given' examples. The Italian sample consists of women who have already shown their willingness to participate in sharing their stories, with their own drawn representations. Diagrams and visual representations are, in general, powerful tools in the research process. Visual data add new dimensions to data narratives. Differently from the linguistic system, diagrams provide an alternative way to explore the object of the study, reducing potential biases. Graphics and images can be considered sources of data in themselves because they go beyond representation to allow investigation of an object, with a generative potential in sense-making (Buckley and Waring, 2013). The relationship between concepts and images improves the theoretical complexity of the data, avoiding reductionism or simplification. In the NDCS data, diagrams have afforded an additional way to elicit data and were used in the original interview process to encourage narratives. Respondents have discussed their diagrams with the interviewer during the interview process. In the cases selected here, the transcripts show that respondents often talked as they drew their sketch, with the drawing process itself facilitating the telling of their stories. In analysis, the diagrams have also offered summary representations of respondents' life trajectories that supported a reflective and dialogical approach to data (Elliott, 2012, p.291).

A range of backgrounds, including different socio-economic and occupational status and years of schooling are represented in the composition of the sample. In this article, four pairs of cases, British and Italian, are selected to exemplify different types of patterns that emerge from our analysis. An emic perspective (Bray, Adamson, Mason, 2007) is thus implicit in this selection of the smaller set of eight cases for deeper analysis and comparative exploration. The qualitative methodological approach is based on thematic, linguistic and narrative analysis of the transcriptions, using Nvivo. An adaptation of the framework of Tedder and Biesta (2007; 2008) guides the analysis using the categories of the Narrative Learning framework as: Plot; Key events; Narrative character; Core identity; Self-definition; Position of self; Scripts; Genres, archetypes; Reflection. This common frame facilitates the comparative analysis of the two samples. The validity of the results is constantly verified by a continuous process of discussion and by a comparative analysis

conducted by the two authors (UK and Italian) both separately and together. According to Cortazzi and Jin (2007), the focus is on how the analysis represents the participant's voice and ensuring the analysis is appropriate to what the teller means. When the story is related to a socio-cultural context not shared by the teller, the relationship between the teller, the story, the audience and the researcher is not so evident. The close cross-cultural collaboration of researchers in this study has enabled this problem to be better overcome.

Correspondences between narrative and comparative research facilitate the analysis of the tellers' stories and the elicitation of the meaning in them by the researchers. Narrative research and the qualitative tradition in comparative research share commitments to reflection on individual cases and relationships between them in ways that are alert to their situatedness in place and time (Barrett (2006, p.113). The aim in comparing British and Italian women's stories is to show how women in mid-life represent and evaluate their lives, providing meaning and considering key events of their life course. The comparison allows an elicitation of the meanings embedded in narratives and in sketches. Research questions are: How do the women's representations of the life course reflect the relationship between agency, identity and learning in UK and in Italy? To what extent do representations of the life course of women who have grown up and lived their lives in Italy suggest shared features or differences from those of the women in the UK NCDS sample? To what extent do these shared and contrasting features help to explain the intertwining of identity, agency and learning with cultural norms and expectations in the two countries?

### 3. Findings: peaks, troughs and turning points in the life course

British and Italian diagrams show a variety of features and images used by women to express their life course: a curve, a spiral, a ladder, steps, waves. Some diagrams reveal significantly similar trends. For example, one English woman (n.18UK) represents her life course as a broken line and makes a sketch in which the ups and downs are very pronounced. The amplitude and the increasing depth of the upward and downward movements signal important changes in the most recent part of the life course. This woman, who is a nurse at the time of the interview, represents herself as an isolated child; one of the downs of her life was the death of the father during her final exams in university. Other important key events coupled to the ups and downs of her life are becoming a Christian Church member, having a baby (a *killer milestone*), her mother's death, with her faith contributing to the overall shape: "I would say my life journey is very much interacted with my faith, if it hadn't got a faith on it: it would be a different shape all together [...] if you could say, probably that's a Christian journey".

The Italian diagram (n.6IT) illustrates a similar trend, emphasising two deep troughs located at six years ("a very sad infancy... when my sister born I was having to be a baby sitter") and at the age of 45 ("problems with my partner and with job"). This woman marks her specific ages at key points in the life line: the age at which she has obtained a university degree and the age at which she became the mother of one child. She declares that her mother was the most important person of her life, the basis where she builds and shapes her life.

Another example comes from two sketches where the comparison between the Italian and UK cases seems, at first sight, to show remarkable correspondences. In the first case (n.58UK), the British woman depicts her life course as a heart monitor, explaining in the interview the association between life and heart. She reflects on the idea of the crisis as a moment of renewal strictly tied to important key events of her life: childhood, marriage, the end of marriage. This woman reveals a great awareness of herself: “But, hmmm, probably a key point this year would be just turning 50 and, hmmm, and where my life goes to next. I’m probably--, for the first time I’m probably in control of that, not necessarily of the people. You know, I’ve been a wife, a mother, a friend, a worker, a lover and now it’s like time for me really”. Her sketch insists on equivalence between her life and her heart as a result from a “horrific childhood”, a husband “with demons of his childhood inside him”, a higher degree, two babies, a job as nurse, and an important illness overcome.

The Italian woman (n.5IT) offers a very similar sketch to the UK case n.58, using the same image of a heart line. This woman with a university degree has two babies from two different partners from whom she is separated, after she moved to another city. She defines herself as a solitary person, who spends her life day by day, without projects, passive and a disbeliever because of illness: “I’m a fatalist, open to all is new [...] I live in present”. In the drawing, two arrows indicate positive moments without crisis or life events that are troubling or upsetting. The two sketches present the same turning points (marriage, academic degree, two children, illness, end of marriage) but the meanings of crisis or absence of crisis were interpreted in different way in the narratives and were marked in the sketches: in the UK heart line, the woman marks the troughs between the peaks as positive periods for calm and renewal, while in the Italian one the troughs represented the negative moments of the crisis.

These visual correspondences emphasize that parallels cannot be assumed in the stories; the parallels can be drawn only in relation to the related pictorial synthesis of the life course. The drawings are not symbolic representations of identity but visual descriptions of the life lived and synthetized by a graphic line. In these particular cases, participants did not use time and events as hooks on which to hang the life shape. The decision to sketch does not necessarily indicate the decision to produce a suitable composition of the personal trend of life or a real internalisation or awareness of the personal trajectories. So, we can assume that the drawings are descriptions not representations of the life course and they do not necessarily imply agency.

In the wider — Italian plus UK — sample, a recurrent series of key events emerge from analysis using Nvivo, revealing eight key influences that shapes the life course.

1. To have/lose a baby
2. To go to/leave school
3. To have a faith
4. To have good/not good relationships with parents and family
5. To have good/not good personal/ family health
6. To have/change/lose job
7. To have/separate from partner
8. To have/have not a social/cultural life

With a limited number of milestones, different “life palettes” are composed. These eight elements are markers used to describe the life curriculum rather than hints applied

to understand or interpret it. All of the women in the samples from the two countries realize that key events are often associated with life turning points; nevertheless, this observation is not directly associated to the awareness of what these events mean or imply. The remark often appears superficial and not embedded in the shaping of identity. However, narratives help British and Italian women to reflect on their life history by giving, through the acts of drawing and talking, a possibility to order their thinking in the process of composing the stories. All those key influences recur throughout the narratives, but there are some differences in emphasis that the comparative approach best reveals.

In UK cases, the key influences are significant for the impetus they give for a change in direction in some kind. For example, family figures have a role both positive than negative; usually the relationship with the father is referred to as more complicated and awkward than the relationship with the mother, which is frequently split between supportive and competitive. Also, to have/change/lose a job and to have/separate from a partner are present and widely narrated in most of the UK cases as elements that enable women to evaluate their possibilities in a different way, introducing a change in a life direction. A recurrent sequence occurring before the age of 25 emerges from the cases: education and learning in adult life are central elements in shaping life. Women who left school early usually enter first jobs that did not require specific qualification. The take-up of opportunities for different forms of learning after 25 years of age could transform this condition, introducing dynamic factors for change of situation. The search for a new job, as we will see in Italian cases, does not imply an obvious connection between learning and job, but the first could have a role in stimulating the second. So, the search for new qualifications in work is often linked with take-up of learning opportunities in adult life.

In the British cases, the changes in life course trajectories are usually linked to a specific event told in the story; in facing up to this event, the search for new directions or meaning can be considered as an indicator of agency. Some “negative” situations (e.g. walked out on job, walked out on husband) are sometimes used to motivate significant or positive transformations in the personal life story. The sense of agency can be connected to the search for a new shape in the life course. So the life event is used to explain how and why the women made a “right” or a “new” choice. The shape of life trajectory is an open construction, and the agency is a subjective ability to search a personal setting (“per se”), to be able to cope with life and its events.

In the Italian cases, the most frequent key influences are strictly linked to having good/not good relationships with parents and family. The influence of family figures is very pronounced in all stories and this happens in a negative way, as a form of control, but also in a positive way, as a form of reinforcement and support. In the Italian patterns, a specific internal milestone is very important: the parents’ life and their death. Differently from British cases, education and learning play a secondary role in the Italian visualisations and stories. The ability of the women to give direction to their life course is not associated to these two factors and does not work in a personal dimension (“per se”). Rather, agency seems to correspond to a social ability or a social performance: managing family situations (new birth, parents, parent’s death, husband). The principal change in the Italian life course seems, in these cases, to correspond to a role passage from being a daughter to becoming a mother. If in the British cases agency is a personal searching for an individual development, in the Italian ones the emphasis is a specific searching for stability, for a social continuity. The Italian sense of agency seems to correspond to



avoiding the “wrong” choices; it is associated with a specific life event and to its potential for disruption, trouble, change. The Italian women’s life trajectories seem to be the result of threats avoided than active constructions built around and through life events. The life courses described and illustrated by the Italian women are shaped by the relationships with social and family groups during the half century of their lives while the British life courses seem to be fashioned and represented through memorable events and actions that are traced through fifty years of life.

Agency during the life course is manifested in in different ways. On the one hand agency is a path of personal development related the person’s awareness in composing a biography and giving direction to their life; from the other hand agency is the ability to compose a personal path from a social/family situation. These comparative observations seem to confirm, retrospectively over fifty years, some differences in cultural expectations in the two countries, influenced by the societal norms and demands on the gender roles of daughter, wife, mother.

## 4. Findings: patterns and models of identity, agency and learning

Different patterns of relationship between identity, agency and learning have emerged from the accounts. Using the different combinations of agency (low agency = A-; high agency = A+) and learning (low learning = L-; high learning = L+) we found in the stories four profiles of identity according to the weak or strong presence of agency or learning in the women’s lives. These configurations are not considered as a moral labelling or judging of the persons, but are used to indicate the recurrent pattern of responses in the interviews. Table 1 summarizes the combinations.

**Tabla 1.** Profile combinations.

PROFILE	PROFILE ACRONYM	COMBINATION
Contained	C	-L -A
Reactive	R	+L -A
Testing	T	-L +A
Conscious and Reflective	CR	+L +A

In the Contained profile of responses (Acronym C), women use few expressions of agency or learning; they see themselves as having few options or as restricted in their life choices. The Reactive profile (acronym R) emerges from responses which are marked by expressions of learning, but with a little occurrence of passages of agency or personal beliefs in ability to change aspects of life situations by personal action. In the Testing profile (acronym T), women express much action-taking in their lives, but they talk about these actions without references to learning or self-insight. Conscious and reflective (acronym CR) expressions of identity are frequent in personal accounts of women who talk explicitly about self-insight gained from their life trajectories, developing a form of acknowledgment regarding their lives and their relationships.

The following analysis sets out, in a comparative perspective, to illustrate each category by two cases: one Italian case, one British case. The aim is to use these illustrate

cases to show how learning and agency are strictly embedded in the identity expressions of these women aged fifty, as the accounts reveal combinations of learning and agency that produce various modes in managing and in leading the life course.

Comparing cases of Contained profile (C), we have selected the British case n.118UK and the Italian case n.29IT. The women use few expressions of agency or learning; they see themselves as having few options or as restricted in their life choices.

The UK (Scottish) woman (case n.188) describes her life as series of jobs and births of children until she returns to work in a bank (her original job) for the next 24 years. This interview reveals some difficulties the respondent had in making her lifeline; she needed prompting by the interviewer to cover some periods and events in her life. There are few points of reference. The main ones that the interviewer elicits are the fact that she lived abroad during her teens, her mother's addiction and the tensions in her relationships with her brother. There are very few details about her husband, or daughters and no references to learning beyond schooling. There is little sense that she feels she has learned or can learn from her life. Her biography is narrated as a linear sequence of events: left school, job, married, pregnant, left job, first daughter, second daughter, back to the (same) job. She seems to have some difficulties in telling her story, which may reflect reticence or shyness ("Hmmm, what else have I done?"). She only replies to questions and does not reflect on her story: she analyses one central event at length involving the role she and her brothers played in a family conflict over an inheritance. There are few expressions of identity: she seems reluctant to communicate about herself in a positive way but she ends with the sense that she could do and be more if pushed by others:

"How do I define myself? I don't know. .... I bore myself. I bore myself 'cause I don't do anything, but then I can be happy too. I just need a wee shove at the moment, I think that's what it is".

The Italian woman in this pair of cases presents herself as a "quiet girl" and she mentions the first key event in life course: a surgical operation she had at the age of nine she feels limited her life possibilities (she mentions that, for physical reasons, she didn't learn to ride a bicycle). She left school at 14 and at this same age she met her future husband. A recurrent theme of her narrative is the omnipresent control of her parents and how their guidance influenced her choices. After she married, her husband's mother also assumed this role, and she describes how she left her job to support her husband's family:

"I have lived through difficult and sad moments because of the illness and the death of mother-in-law that I considered as a mother because she considered me as her daughter. I left my job to foster her and my husband's family, so I worked in my mother-in-law's shop with the two brothers of my husband"<sup>1</sup>.

Even though "some persons" challenged her to pursue further studies, or to combine work and studies, she did not want to do this and she asserts that she is "proud enough" in her life realisation as a mother and as a wife: "If I could be go back in time, I would do the same things".

The Reactive profile (acronym R) reflects a pattern of responses marked by expressions of learning, but with a little occurrence of passages indicating or personal

<sup>1</sup> Italian quotes are translated into English from the original transcripts by the authors.

beliefs in ability to change aspects life situations by personal action. A Reactive profile characterizes the British case n.41UK and the Italian case n.9IT. In the British case n.41, the narrative is organised around the cross-roads in her life and her choice to organise her life around her children. The identity narrative is explicitly linked first with the influences of father and then the husband. She explains that when she married the main influence on her changed, becoming her husband instead of her father. The role of males (father, husband, brother) in her life characterized her identity as “dependent” in relation to these figures. The narrative is assembled around the crossroads in her diagram, that could be interpret as the self-justification about her life around her choice: to have children instead of academic qualifications and career. Nevertheless, she needs to be protected, assured, persuaded, supported in her choices. She justifies dependence on partner’s views “because of the work he does”. Reactions to events and decisions such as changes in job are not autonomous but reliant on support, affirmation, supervision, other-oriented identity with little self-directedness. She speaks more and more to her self because she is the centre of the story. All the events are collected around this centre; she learnt from the job not from her life experiences. Sequence of changes in job are considered as new learning; actions tend to be “reactive” and highly dependent on dominant others, from whom she takes her steer, restricting self-direction in learning but revealing self-awareness and potential for learning from her life.

The Italian case 29 IT shows a woman that has taken important choices in her life, such as deciding to work in a factory rather than in the family’s bakery or deciding to live as unmarried with her boyfriend. But despite these suggestions of an independence of spirit, in her narrative she constantly describes herself as dependent on others. So she expresses her gratitude to her parents, because of values that she learnt and for “what I’ve become”; to the nuns because of the care when parents were working; to her school professors for the training in a good communication; to her first boyfriend “that gave me the awareness to be a woman”; to the sons, for the great joy that they brought to her life. She does not convey a sense of taking her own direction and she tends always to ascribe somebody else her choices. She does not talk in terms of key events but in terms of the key relationships that compose the drawing of her life course.

The Testing profile (T: -L +A), is well captured by the British case n58. in which the woman’s story does not have a sequential order because it is focused on traumatic events of abuse as a child. She presents her life in few descriptive lines: mum, school, husband, degree, qualification, job. The focus of the story is the abuse not rationally analysed but told by emotion and feelings. Life is re-constructed around this event. She portrays her life as a heart and life monitor, characterised by periods of crisis and then stability, as she goes from one crisis event to another involving debt and upheavals in personal relationships. The primary function is the search for meaning and for peace (or inner justification). She learns from her life and from her difficulties rather than her academic studies; she tries to be a better person, she tries to have new possibilities to be different from her story. Her narrative has within it conscious with reflective, analytic elements but she is inside the original abuse event and cannot be disconnected from it: for that reason, her reflection is a self-discourse in search of sense-making. The many facets of this search are separated not unified in a core; she tries to look at many possibilities but learning that moves her life forward seems limited by the self-discourse. In going from crisis to crisis, there is learning potential but it does not seem to take her forward. She has a dream of making a new life far away from her present situation. There is as yet unfulfilled potential for self-development which she herself identifies:

“I’m like ‘well, try anything’. And this I guess is--, I don’t know if that represents now, it’s just that sense of... I know there’s a period of stability and that lovely word you said, renewal, but I know it will go up again (into crisis) and I think somehow that’s the bit that I want to change, my response to it...”.

The Italian woman (n.6 IT) also has negatively feelings from her childhood. She refers to a sad childhood because of two female figures: a harsh grandmother, whom she remembers as using punitive methods of control, and a mother who has “cluttered” her mind, by being very directive in taking important decisions in her life:

“My mother has influenced my life. In her attempts to fill my head, she gave me many opportunities but she has generated in me many insecurities because of very often she decided for me what I had to do, without asking me what I would prefer or not”.

The male figures in her life are also are not considered in a positive way: the father delegates all decisions to her mother, a first boyfriend was very jealous, an ex-husband very competitive (in sport and also with her): “I’m not competitive, I felt frustrated, lacking in competence, inadequate”. She refers to the busyness of her life, that is and was been full of initiatives, activities and so on, firstly according to mother’s decision, and after according to the demands of her working life. She describes having her child as a highlight and turning point. She describes how the birth of her child has been for her a great occasion for personal fulfilment but also how it precipitated a crisis with her ex-husband. At the time of interview, she considers herself to have become “a more balanced person, more able to express myself and my personality”.

The Conscious and reflective profile (acronym CR) is frequent in narratives of women who talk explicitly about self-insight gained from their life trajectories, developing a form of acknowledgment regarding their lives and their relationships. In the selected UK case (n.193UK) the woman talks about how she worked in a range of occupations (bank, optician’s practice) until her son’s graduation created a turning point that led her think in new ways about her own potential. She talks about how the led her to a decision to advance her own learning, through PhD enrolment and later-life identity development. The sequence is told as a chronology, a series of passages: infancy, school, (no adolescence), job, partner, job changes, son, degree and PhD. No specific or traumatic\challenges events are narrated; the “insight” of son’s graduation is tied to the decision to advance in learning. No justification is given for her life choices. Telling the story seems to help her to find the “fil rouge” of her life and to find the potential for self-development. The story has a function of reminding her who she is and whence she is coming to her actual self. Many reflections on her identity or events seem to be important not for the task (the interview) but for her empowerment. Reflection for her is a form of awareness about herself, in which she spontaneously takes up opportunities as they arise (for example, changes in job). The expression of her sense of self unfolds with and throughout the narration. It seems that she learns from her story about herself because she becomes more and more conscious of her changing identity, centred on her passion for learning science. “Biologist” is the dimension of identity that she wants to be socially recognized. The identity is embedded with the profession, that takes her beyond the influence of the family. She recognizes a tendency to low self-esteem: “sometimes I can’t think of myself as being at that level” and she defines herself “quite happy”.

In the Italian case n.12IT, the woman lived her childhood with grandparents because of the long illness of her mother. She perceived herself as abandoned and not accepted by her mother. She felt she came “alive” during her time at the college, and she recounts the time she started to express her personality (“my life is exploded”) when she decided to choose a type of scooter against her father’s wishes. Two key events characterise her narrative and her sketch. First, after she was fired from her job in an assurance company in mid-life, she decided to seek a future job that she would like doing and which would fit better with her interests. She took the loss of her job as a new beginning for changing her life. So, she explains, she enrolled in a nursing school and gained a professional degree at 40. Second, after the death of a baby during pregnancy she learns, over time, to cease living this dramatic event as a punishment from God. She overcomes her feelings of anger with God to experience faith as a shining light giving her healing:

“My life has had many difficulties, but I’ve realized that all things happened to me have helped me to growth, to be in the game, and have been useful to believe in myself”.

## **5. Discussion: comparing narratives in context**

These narrative accounts have been elicited as research participants have reflected on their life experiences and in particular on their own representations of their life course and on turning points in their lives. Changes experienced by women at their self-identified turning points can entail greater confidence and willingness on the part of women to develop themselves in new ways. The reverse can also be true: individuals can become trapped by events and locked into their own stories. The four recurrent profiles: Contained; Reactive; Testing; Conscious-Reflective can be recognised in the extent of each woman’s capabilities to analyse her life and to push her life a little bit ahead. These self-development capabilities appear most pronounced in cases that are characterised by conscious-reflective expressions of identity development. Moreover, the combination of strong expressions of learning and agency (+L, +A) is evident in accounts which also show capabilities to reflect on and learn from their own lives.

However, shifting interpretations of life trajectories, and the degree to which such understandings are sustained over time, depend on the interplay of cultural and systemic factors. The role of learning is connected to agency, where capacities to give direction to one’s life are embedded and expressed in the individual’s reflections on events, activities, roles and relationships perceived as important, particularly at turning points. In the British life courses it emerges like an exploration for a personal development built from family and social situations and stimulated by life course events, facilitated by the ready availability of part-time and ‘second-chance’ types of educational programmes for adults at earlier times in their lives and the flexible access routes to higher education that enabled them to change directions. In Italian women’s narratives, the role of learning is remarked upon in the first part of the women’s life course accounts only and associated to the school periods (infancy, adolescence or the entrance in adulthood) as formal learning. Other forms of learning (further, recurrent, incidental, informal and non-formal) are not evident in the stories or in the graphic visualisations. Agency and learning do not appear explicitly connected in the Italian cases, in which agency tends to be expressed according

to the ability to deal with ups and downs, events or non-events, that shape the life course. In both UK and Italian cases life course trajectories are shaped through expressions of 'bounded agency', which are often acknowledged to depend upon the enabling activities of others.

Narrative and comparative lenses bring distinct but related perspectives on these phenomena. The methodological correspondence between narrative research and the qualitative tradition in comparative research is shown in a commitment to reflect on relationships in ways that are alert to the cultural context. While comparativists see relations in less personalised terms they are alert to the social realities of researched cases. Narrativists view their subjects as situated in place as well as time, as do comparativists, who view their subjects in the context of systems and societies that change over time (Barrett 2009). Their intersection leads to a focus on temporality, in which events are viewed as unfolding over time, keeping past, present and anticipated future in view.

The retrospective accounts have shown how the women's expressions of agency in a life course perspective can be understood as temporal (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), reflecting the ways in which habit and routines of the past and what people believe is possible for them in the future are brought together in decisions and action-taking in the contingencies of the present moment. This temporally embedded agency can be individual or collective and is not structurally determined, in the senses offered by Bourdieu (1993), since horizons and imagined futures can be reflectively reformulated and re-imagined through a process of self-learning. The combination of comparative-narrative perspective strives to keep in view the ways in which health, income and social networks at older ages are the consequence of what has happened to us over the course of lives. Women's situations in their sixth decade of life always reflect personal decisions as well as many influences and environmental factors, including interventions by the welfare and social state such as education policies, access to health care and types of social protection and support (Borsch-Supan *et al* 2011). Where this is the essence of narrative accounts of 'turning points', the identity development that takes place through agency and learning is not that of the self-propelled autonomous individual but, rather, relational and reflexive.

Where our analysis of these narratives connects identity development with temporal understandings of agency and self-learning through the life course, we have to be alert to variations in how women can learn to cope with and move on from conditions and relationships that reflexively shape their lives. Some narratives reflect the gendered relations that transcend national boundaries; the IT-UK comparison however reveals how particular historically and culturally-embedded gender regimes (O'Connell 1987) are embedded in expressions of agency, learning and identity development. Differences in access to resources —personal, relational or material— can further influence patterns which are part of an existing 'gender regime', rooted as a network of norms, regulations and principles in the structure of social practices (Connell 1987 p 139). There are parallels between the present study and Connell's use of biographical life-history interviewing, in education, family life and workplaces. Women in this present study have given their retrospective accounts over periods in which gender regimes have shifted. The gender gap in both countries has narrowed over the 50 years of their lives. Although the gender gap in the UK is, at the present time, significantly narrower than the gender gap in Italy, (World Economic Forum 2013) the WEF rankings also show significant variations between the gaps in differing areas of women's lives and that narrowing of the gap has

stagnated in the UK. At the same time, dominant gender regimes and characterisations of 'gender gaps' are themselves increasingly challenged in both countries by migration patterns and multi-cultural influences. .

A reflexive approach that sees gender regimes as dynamic rather than static emphasises the compound mix of inner abilities of the person which are not clearly visible but can be made effective when the situation stimulates the person to act or choose differently (see also Evans 2006). These inner capabilities, are developed reflexively through experiences in a range of life and work environments, and there is potential to support people, through education in adult life, towards the achievement of 'critical insight' (see Roth 1971, Stromquist 2006) into themselves and into the limits and possibilities afforded by their everyday situations and relationships.

## 6. Conclusions

Women's representations of their life course and of turning points in their lives reveal different propensities to reflect on and learn from their own lives and, in comparative perspective, contrasting relational, cultural and institutional affordances that can enable or limit them in moving their lives forward. Some of the women's accounts reflect gendered relations that transcend national boundaries, others are embedded in the historically prevalent societal conditions and gender regimes of Italy and UK, respectively. They represent contrasting manifestations of gender regimes in action and can be understood, at both individual and societal levels. It is too simplistic to interpret these manifestations solely in terms of assumptions that a Southern European heritage renders women culturally pre-disposed to privilege familial duty over their own life chances to a greater extent than UK women. While agency can be argued to include the co-construction of situations that promote or limit agency, that is to say actors are often complicit in the conditions that limit them, it has to be recognised that the wider socio-economic framework can either reinforce or disrupt cultural pre-dispositions that disadvantage women. The gender gap in Cuba, for example, is smaller than it is in the UK. Furthermore, recognition of the challenges of increasing social and cultural diversity to dominant cultural pre-dispositions, while beyond the scope of the present retrospective analysis, also introduces an important caveat to overly simplistic interpretations of the distinctiveness of the respective gender regimes. The comparative life course approach to the understanding of propensities for self-learning and identity development in adult life indicates how:

- development takes time and that it reflects cumulative experiences (e.g., the accumulation of individual resources such as educational credentials and the progressive development of capabilities).
- the social contexts within which human development is embedded range from close interactions with significant others (proximal) to macro-social conditions (distal).
- life course transitions, such as from school to work, in job change or job loss, or in work to retirement, are not only shaped by institutional and labour market structures but also involve developmental tasks that challenge the individual actors as well as cultural norms and expectations.
- individual decision making, bounded by the socially positioned life the person leads, social institutions, and wider macro-social conditions, can also be understood in terms of wider social-ecological interdependencies.

Comparative reflections on these temporally embedded, retrospective accounts of lives shaped over the course of half a century lead us further into the debate on individualisation and the extent to which the 'traditional' social structures of class, gender, religion and family are weakening, as biographical negotiation confronts pre-given life worlds. The realities of gender gaps and the slowness with which these are narrowing alert us to the enduring challenges and limits on human agency. Variations in the ways in which women move their lives forward reveal inner capabilities that are developed reflexively through experiences and relationships, with potential for adult education to better support people towards the achievement of critical insight into these experiences and in learning from their lives. This learning from their lives extends to an understanding of their situation in the wider context of gender regimes and their own future learning and development potential.

## 7. Note

This paper is a common and shared work based on equal contributions; however it is possible to attribute to K.Evans the sections 3,5 and 6 and to C.Biasin the sections 2 and 4.

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