

## Agency, identity and learning at turning points in women's lives: A comparative UK-Italian analysis

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses 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. Particular emphasis is put on the relationships between identity, learning and agency that emerge through work, family and life experiences. The reference paradigm is adopted from Narrative Learning Theory and the approach is qualitative and comparative in analysing the participant's voice. For the UK sample, the data sources are 16 semi-structured interviews, including drawings representing the life course, selected from the study deposited in the UK Archives Data under the "Social Participation and Identity" project; 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. This study will show how 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. The comparative perspective highlights, through two-level analysis (micro and macro) and by contrasting cultural, relational and social contexts, variations in ways these women are enabled or restricted in moving their lives forward. The research also contributes to methodological insight into the use of drawings in elucidating life course narratives.*

**Keywords:** adult learning; agency; narrative learning; turning points; women's life course



## Introduction

The concept of trajectories is typically used in work on transitions of young adults into the labour market, providing ideal type, segmented routes that can be used to understand a variety of personal histories (Evans & Heinz, 1994). In adult life, routes diverge, experiences diversify still further and multiplicities of new contingencies come into play (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Biasin, 2012; Ecclestone, Biesta & Hughes, 2009). In researching adults' life and work experiences, initial career trajectories take on historical significance.

Trajectories start, in early life, with family relationships, with educational achievement, moving onto occupational choices, applying for and taking up jobs and the processes of establishing independent personal and family lives. These processes continue in adult life with activities undertaken with the aims of maintaining employment, changing employment, balancing work and family life, taking risks, seeking stability, finding personal fulfilment. They often involve changes in the adult's orientations to learning, work and family. This paper discusses the ways in which women aged 50, in contrasting cultural contexts, narrate and portray turning points in their life course, with particular reference to the relationships between identity, agency and learning, including opportunities to learn through work and life experiences. These accounts reflect identity in the articulation of dimensions of self and in the adults' motivations, beliefs and attitudes towards learning and their own capabilities to achieve in and through learning (Kirpal, 2011). Their orientations can also change according to specific experiences of success or failure, opportunities or setbacks at any stage. 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.

In the conceptual framework for exploration of women's representations of turning points in their lives, we draw on theories of life course (Heinz & Krüger, 2001) and, in particular, approaches with relevance to the study of women at the age of fifty.

According to the literature in life-span development (Kittrell, 1998; Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001; Sugarman, 1986), we consider biographical transitions and turning points from a gender perspective and from a midlife perspective.

Transitions – normative, non-normative, silent – involve individual changes, social roles modifications, social and historical factors that define transformation in the life course (Perrig-Chiello & Perren, 2005). Turning points refer to heterogeneous experiences and important life events that are personally significant in promoting a change in an individual's life trajectory (Rönka, Oravala & Pulkkinen, 2003). Middle age is a period of life associated with many and multifaceted transitions (age-, time-, event-, duration- and emotion-dependent) that impact on the life course of individuals. Turning points can be viewed as important developmental crises that require some reorientation in values and goals priority or demand a search for a new meaning in adults' lives.

Studies agree in emphasising that gender differences and age grouped timing patterns are relevant factors in transitions within a life-span context. Reports from the National Child Development Study (Brown & Dodgeon, 2010) point out that surveys of adults at age 50 can serve as a special baseline in order to investigate life-histories (series of transitions, turning points, number of life events and psycho-social experiences, crisis and identity development paths). From a chronological and longitudinal perspective, women aged 50 offer a special lens on their life course.

The exercise of agency, the ability to give direction to one's life, is understood as a bounded and reflexive process that is exercised through environments, drawing on Evans

(2006, 2007, 2009; Evans & Waite, 2013) and Biesta, Field, Hodkinson, Macleod, & Goodson (2011).

The concept of biographical learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) refers to a close link between learning and biography. The elaboration of this link concerns the ways in which people learn from their lives, and the significance of such learning processes (Tedder & Biesta, 2007b). Biography is one's life. The focus of a biographical learning approach is on making sense of one's life course, faced by challenges and transitions (Hallqvist & Hydén, 2013).

Furthermore, biographical learning perspectives (Goodson, 2013; Tedder & Biesta, 2007a, 2009) reveal aspects of the narrative-in-action which permit people to reflect, to negotiate and to make claims about different life events and about life course. These are dominant perspectives in European scholarship and research in adult learning (Fox, 2006). 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. Three dimensions associated with structuration, internal-external control and reproduction-transformation are connected in the conceptualisation of bounded agency as a socially embedded, active and potentially transformative process. Expressions of bounded agency are as representative of the distal effects of socioeconomic environments and cultural landscapes as they are reflective of individual capabilities and the proximal influences of workplace, family and community.

Agency in adult life operates through engagements in and through the social world; it is exercised through the environments and institutional practices of everyday life in changing social, landscapes. Understanding, from the perspective of adults themselves, the role of activating events and activating relationships in the life-course shapes not only theoretical conceptions of the life-course but also the adult education practices that seek to engage adults in learning in mid-life and the older years. This exploration of the connections between expressions of identity, agency and learning in the narratives of women aged 50 aims not only to gain contextualised insights into how women use the dynamics of events, experiences and relationships to move their lives forward, but also to support the case for approaches that facilitate biographical learning to become integral to adult education practices.

## Research and methods

The methodology is designed to explore the narrative and symbolic representations of turning points in the narratives of the research participants. This approach is informed by Mattingly (2007), with the aim of understanding the implicit meaning (tacit and naive theory-in-use) of the ideas of turning points and movements "up and down" as expressed in the narratives and sketches. Also we aim to show the relationship between agency, learning and identity embedded in these narratives, elucidating how different cultural roles and expectations are reflected in women's representations.

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 study deposited in the UK Archives Data under the "Social Participation and Identity" project. From this study, that is a sub-sample 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 also asked either to choose, from eight life course diagrams, 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. From these, we have further selected 16 interviews in which the turning points were represented as up and down lines.

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. Twenty four of these diagrams were with undulations indicative of turning points.

According to a comparative approach (Fairbrother, 2014), in this paper 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. In the UK sample, this inclination was signalled by the desire of women in the wider NDCS interview sample to draw their own representation rather than select from given examples. In Italian sample, this predisposition was indicated by the willingness of participants approached through the networks of the researcher to participate in sharing their stories, with their own drawn representations. Both approaches to selection produced samples which were found to be distributed in socio-economic background, occupational status and years of schooling. A further selection was then made according to the classification of the narratives and representations. We have chosen, for this paper, 4 UK-Italian pairs of cases to illustrate each type of outcome. An emic perspective (Bray, Adamson & Mason, 2007) was thus implicit in the selection of this set of eight cases for deeper analysis and comparative exploration.

The research questions are: How do women's representations of the life course reflect the relationship between agency, identity and learning? 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? How might these shared and contrasting features be explored further to elucidate the intertwining of identity, agency and learning with cultural norms and expectations?

The qualitative methodological approach is based on thematic, linguistic and narrative analysis of the transcriptions, using Nvivo as a tool. An adaptation of the framework of Tedder and Biesta (2007a, 2007b) has guided the analysis. 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. As Cortazzi and Jin (2007) underline, particular attention is given to how the analysis represents the participant's voice and how the researcher analysis is appropriate to what the teller means, in the context of relationship between the teller, the story, the audience and the researcher. This issue is more evident when the story is related to a socio-cultural context not shared by the teller and the researcher (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007). According to Barrett (2006, p. 113), similarities between narrative and comparative research facilitate the emergence and the respect of the tellers' stories and the elicitation of the meaning in them by the researchers.

The purpose of comparing English and Italian women's stories in this research is to illustrate how women in mid-life represent and evaluate their lives, providing meaning as they consider key events of their life course. The comparison allows an elicitation of the meanings of the ups and the downs represented by the women's narratives and sketches.

It illustrates how identities are shaped and revealed in expressions of learning and agency in participants from two different countries.

## Findings

### *Turning point and trajectories: Similarities and differences in representations*

As the images<sup>1</sup> show, in the sample considered (16 British and 24 Italian cases selected), British and Italian diagrams show a range of features and images used by women to express their life course: a curve, a spiral, steps (Fig.1). A recurrent visualisation of the life course is a wave, floating in the paper sheet without a preferred direction rather than an arrow, a ladder or other figures.

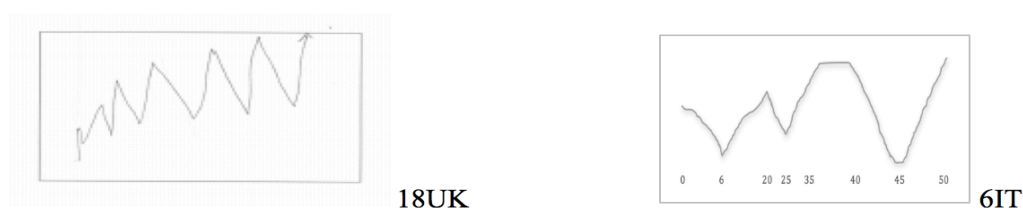
Figure 1: Shapes of life course



Some pairs of diagrams seem to show similar trends (Fig.2). In particular, one English woman (n.18UK) represents her life course as a zig-zag line, making a sketch in which the ups and downs are very pronounced, the amplitude, deepness marking important changes in the last part of the life course and the final arrow an orientation to a future beyond her present situation.. This woman is a nurse and 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, have a baby (a 'killer milestone'), the mother's death, the faith: '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) shows a similar trend with ups and downs less marked but with two deep depressions, located at six years ('a very sad infancy... when my sister was 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 the specific time of key events of the life course: she has obtained a university degree and has given birth to one child; she declares that her mother was the most important person of her life, the basis on which she builds and shapes her life.

Figure 2: Similar shapes in diagrams



Another remarkable similarity is in the next two sketches (Fig.3). In the first, the English woman depicts her life course as a heart monitor, explaining in the interview the association between life and heart (n.58UK). She put in evidence 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 UK n.58, using the same image of a heart line. This woman, who also has a university degree, has two babies from two different partners from which she is separated. She talks about her move 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 her illness: 'I'm a fatalist, open to all is new[...] I live in present'. The arrows indicate a few positive moments that have been free of troubling or upsetting events.

The two sketches present the same turning points (marriage, academic degree, two children, illness, end of marriage) but the meaning of crisis or absence of crisis were interpreted in different way in the narratives.

Figure 3: Similar diagrams



These images, sketched as a visual synthesis of a life course, are associated with very different meanings in the narrative accounts. The drawings are not symbolic representations of identity, but pictorial descriptions of the life lived.

In the wider sample, a recurrent series of key events emerges from analysis with Nvivo and reveals a pattern of nine turning points (Table 1). With a limited number of milestones, different "life palettes" are composed. These nine events are markers used to describe the life course.

All the women interviewed in the two countries realize that key events are life turning points; nevertheless this observation is not necessarily directly associated to the awareness of what these events mean or imply.

Table 1: Turning points

BABIES	To have a baby; to lose a baby
EDUCATION	To have an education; to go to/leave school; to go to a particular type of school, eg grammar school, Catholic primary school; to go to college or university; to have a good teacher, to have a degree; to gain new work-related qualification.
FAITH	To have a faith; to go to Church; to change Church
FAMILY	Mum, dad, stepmother, sister, brother, daughter, son
HEALTH	Personal illness; illness of relatives (daughter, husband, parents);
JOB	Work problems; work changes; work dissatisfaction; personal realization in work; to have job-related competence/qualification.
LOVE AFFAIRS	To meet husband; to have a partner; to change partner/boyfriend
MARRIAGE	To be married; to be divorced
SOCIAL LIFE	To take holidays with; to be part of a social or religious association

However, narratives help English and Italian women to reflect on their life history giving, by the acts of drawing and talking, a kind of sequence or an order in composing the narratives. Furthermore, some differences can be highlighted in the two countries.

These nine key-events feature centrally in the accounts of the British women because of the impetus that is attributed to them in changing direction and shaping the life course. Family influences feature strongly, in ambivalent ways. Often the relationship with the father is referred to as more complicated and awkward than the relationship with the mother, frequently split between supportive and competitive.

The basic British pattern is typically composed of five elements: EDUCATION, BABIES, FAMILY, JOB, LOVE AFFAIRS.

We can observe a recurrent sequence occurring before the age of 25 in which education is the component playing an evident role in shaping life. Women who left school early are employed in 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

Differently from the Italians, in British cases, the changes in life course trajectories are usually recognised and connected to a specific event in the narratives; facing this event, the search for new directions or meaning can be considered as an indicator of AGENCY. The transformative effects of some 'negative' situations (e.g. walked out on job, walked out on husband) are sometimes used to explain changes in 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 for a personal setting, to be able to cope with life and its events.

The recurrent Italian pattern comprises four main elements: FAMILY, MARRIAGE, LOVE AFFAIRS, BABIES.

Family figures play a fundamental role in the life courses narrated. The influence of family is very pronounced in all stories. This happens in a negative way, as a form of control, but also in a positive way, as a form of reinforcement and support for the life choices of these women.

In the Italian patterns, the sequence appears more linked to the family factor, in particular to a specific internal milestone: the parents' life and their death. Differently from British cases, education and learning play a secondary role in 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 born, parents, parent's death, husband). The principal change in the Italian life course seems to correspond to a role passage from being a daughter to being a mother. If in British cases agency is a personal searching for an individual development, in 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 to 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 constructed by life events. The life courses described and illustrated by Italian women are shaped by the relationships with social and family groups during the half century of their lives while the English life courses seem to be fashioned and represented through memorable events and actions that are traced through fifty years of life

### **Expressions of identity, agency and learning: Patterns and relationships**

Different patterns of relationship between expressions of identity, agency and learning emerge from the personal accounts. We found in the stories four profiles of identity according to the weak or strong presence of expressions of agency or learning in the women's narratives. 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.

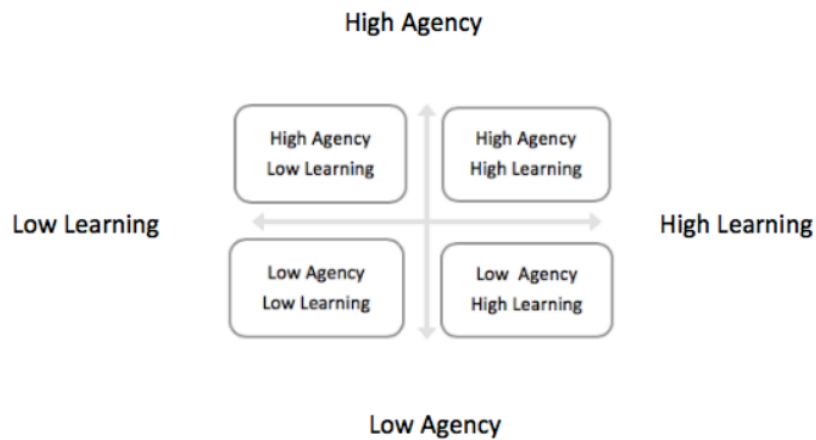
A map can be constructed considering, respectively, agency as the longitudinal dimension and as learning as the latitudinal dimension. In this way it is possible to visualize, on a Cartesian plane, the common conceptual space between the two dimensions considered above.

This space is based on the four combinations, according to the low and the high levels of presence of expressions of agency and learning. This is not a scale with statistical correlation value, but a simple representation of a conceptual space imagined as a physical space, delimited by the two dimensions. These dimensions, considered as interpretative indicators, have been used as explanatory criteria in analysing the selected stories of women

Table 2 summarizes the four combinations. The space is delimited by high and low presence of expressions of agency and of learning, for each dimension. Narratives presented in this article can be placed in the four quadrants, according to the interpretations of expressions of agency, learning and their combination, as considered in the discussion.



Table 2: Agency and Learning in a cartesian space



Narratives are highly differentiated. Some narratives use few expressions of agency or learning; women see themselves as having few options or as restricted in their life choices. The narratives 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. Some women express much action-taking in their lives, but they talk about these actions without references to learning or self-insight, while in other cases 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 aims, in a comparative perspective, to explain 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 can produce various modes in managing and in leading the life course; 8 illustrative cases (4 Italian; 4 UK) will be analysed.

Comparing cases that contain low expressions of agency and low expression of learning (located in the bottom left quadrant of the table 2), we have selected the British case n.14UK and the Italian case n.20IT. Women use few expressions of agency or learning; they see themselves as having few options or as restricted in their life choices. The British woman describes her life as very happy until 42 when her mother died suddenly:

I thought my life was perfect, I thought I had everything, yeah. Yes, I didn't want for anything, I was happy, everything was rosy in the garden and then I'd say after 42, then I'd say my life just went downhill [...] didn't have to worry about anything. It was lovely, and then it all just collapses.

During the narrative, she explains she left school at 16 because education was not important for her then. Looking back from the vantage point of 50 years, she says she now wishes that she had tried harder in her schooling because she has come to realise that education is important for opportunities, but she has not participated in further forms of education in adult life: 'I always said the best day of my life was when I left. Because from the time I was about nine, I always wanted to do hairdressing'. At 17 she met her future husband in a 'blind date', organised by others, and no other key event is mentioned

as important. This interview made almost ten years after the turning point of the mother's death reveals continuing difficulties in coping and she expresses only a vague hope for the future and a sense of insecurity. 'I'm hoping things will move on a little bit now, you know? [...] But just wait to see, I don't say anything because you never know what's round the corner again, you know?'

The Italian woman presents herself as a 'normal child': she mentions specific events of her childhood (she woke early in the morning to prepare breakfast for the family, she helps mum in housework, in particular she irons all family clothes). She did not like school and she left school at 13 when she was hired as a worker. Her wage was held by the mother: she worked 10/12 hours a day and every Sundays she was employed in a pizzeria as a waitress.

During adolescence the relationship with the severe father was perceived as a 'prison': many rules in home, many restrictions in social activities and in new friendships, no leisure time. She tells about the ways she escaped from the father's control and the consequences in punishment, sometimes beating: 'I was terrified because the rules and schedules to be met... otherwise I was in trouble!'. A recurrent theme of her narrative are the limits in her life, laid down by her parents. She met, during a local fair, her husband, defined as a 'very jealous guy': she tells the tricks to avoid her father's control and punishment. She got married at 20 and at 26 she was the mother of two. She left her job to become a housewife, devoted to her sick daughter.

It was a very awful period of my life: eight maybe ten years I spent in hospital to cure my daughter up to the time of the transplantation... It hurts so much to remember, but now it is over<sup>2</sup>.

After this event, her life seems to be 'easier', but financial difficulties (the money and the commitment in building the new house) and the husband's job ('he worked in a factory and he didn't like to have vacations') marked her life course. She seems to be passive, facing the events of her life. She draws her lifeline as a series of continuous segments that move upward slowly.

She doesn't seem to be reactive towards her life and she needs peace and rest rather than to be active. 'At 50, I feel freer than in the past. My husband now is retired, and kids are grown up. Now on Sunday, we go for a "little ride" and I finally can have a short break'<sup>3</sup>.

The British case n.18UK and the Italian case n.5IT are characterized by a low level in agency and by a high level in learning. This common feature is located in the table 2 in the bottom right corner and distinguishes the narratives by a form of reaction to the life events. This British woman talks about learning quite a lot in her narrative; she is a social worker, with a nursing degree, she learnt some languages, she has job changes and she travelled and she appreciates exotic foods and different cultures. She explains that her life journey interacts with her faith ('a Christian journey'). This is expressed as an organising framework and externalised future projection – going to a place beyond her present reach, defined by the Christian faith, to which her faith 'sort of' leads. Her faith is described as giving some kind of meaning an otherwise repetitive pattern in her life: 'That would be just me bumbling along, some good days, some bad days, not particularly going anywhere'. She perceived herself as dependent on people that "pulled" her through problems. She uses a lot of labels to define herself (hopeless in some situations, confident in other situations, reflector, confronter, follower through, dogged person, selfish, sociologist, nurse, systemiser and rationaliser, 'not a brave person but people think that I am') on a fragmented and sometimes contradictory expressions of identity. Many key

events compose her life trajectory and she said that the ups and downs in her drawing correspond to her periods of growth and sliding back in her faith.

The peaks would be times when I've really learned and grown in my faith [...]And the troughs would be times when I've fallen back [...]Yeah, family events, yeah, family events or work situations that have knocked me back. Where I've had to work through deaths.

The Italian case shows a woman that has taken important choices in her life: to have a baby, to divorce twice, to move to another town. She introduces her life as a series of impulsive decisions she regretted afterwards. She explains that to have a date with her first partner and to be pregnant were (re-)actions used to get away from her family. She left her husband and she moved to the city where the new partner was living. She enrolled at the university degree, she had a new baby and she describes many conflicts with the adolescent daughter. 'I started a lot of things, but few things I've finished. Some things didn't end well but, maybe, they're helped me to develop'.

The role of the parents in her life is ambivalent: in the first period of her life course, she wants to get away from them and she wishes to travel far from home; in the second part of her life, she confesses that her parents' role has been fundamental in financial help and in emotional support. She started a reflection about her life but fighting cancer is becoming now, when she's 50, her new challenge. She calls herself a 'fatalist, a peaceful person, open to new things: I don't make plans for the future, I live for today'. She does not convey a sense of taking her own direction and she considers her choices as reactions to somebody (husbands, parents, friends) or to something (living in a town, having/missing work). Her representation of the life course is negative (a sequence of unfavorable and adverse turning points) and depicted as 'constantly moving from up to down: the peaks represent crisis moments, the wave symbolizes time of calm and peacefulness, the line downward are the moment of deep crisis'.

The pattern high agency / low learning, that is located in the table 2 upper left quadrant, is well captured by the British case n.54UK and by the Italian case n.3IT; women express much action-taking in their lives, but they talk about these actions without references to learning or self-insight. The British woman talks about happy childhood against a background being bullied at school and being ashamed of her untidy and disorganised mother. In adult life she reacted to a bad job experience by going to the place next door and asking them for a job. She takes lot of actions, apparently spontaneously and without planning, with big consequences for her life.

I was in charge of the shop, and me and him, just before we got married, fell out, and I went away down to [PLACE10, England] and left him. We had a big fall out and I chucked my job and jumped on a train down to [PLACE10, England]. Don't ask me why, just a silly wee lassie. Got myself a job, got myself somewhere to live, stayed there six months, and then got mugged.

She describes herself as 'happy wee girl', as a child; as an adult, smart, cheery, confident, passionate, nice person; she told that people said that they find her an intimidating person. She is very active in taking her life decisions: she had a child with a cancer and she describes how she decided to have another baby to try to save her ill daughter, and how her tenacity and confidence in the rightness of decisions surprised the medical professionals.

The Italian woman refers to a happy childhood: the youngest child with three brothers, she was an active and petulant child. A disease marked her life and prevented

her from attending pre-school and partially primary school. During adolescence she had many friends and the belief that she could change the world. Her father directly influenced her choices because he decided the secondary school and the faculty she was to attend. She wanted to study tropical diseases and she wanted to work in Africa, but she enrolled in biology. In the narrative, she claims that, after her first job in a blood donation centre and after the first child she gave up her career to promote her husband's job. She explains that this condition pushed her to have a new baby and to have a new job. Being a teacher allowed her to combine work and family. This woman said that the kids have the priority in her choices because 'my well-being corresponds to their well-being' or because 'my life has been set on them'.

When I was 40, I was happier than when I was 30 because I felt a 'complete woman': not too young (as at 20) and not too old. At 40 years, I was teacher, I had two children, a new house, and I could go on vacations to the beach and to the mountains.

Her parents, her brother, her husbands and her children are the most important people in her life. She calls herself 'quite happy, quite complete and comfortable at 50'. The lifeline is depicted as a line upward (not as an uphill path but as an ascension) until the turning point represented by the loss of parents and the sudden death of the loved brother. She thinks that her lifeline can go higher, but she cannot decide its direction: 'I really feel travelling, I really want to do something, even something special, but I don't know well how to do it'.

She is able to cope with life events, but she is not able to learn from her own story or turning points.

The pattern that corresponds to the upper right quadrant, marked by high expressions of both agency and learning is found in the 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.

The British case n.193UK experienced a dramatic break-up of family as a child; when mother left home she describes the fear for her father. She left school at 16, she also left home before she was 17 and she describes herself as a rebellious. She continued to study at a further education college, gaining qualifications that enabled her eventually to obtain a place in university to train as a teacher after a period working as a secretary. She graduated as a teacher. In parallel she had become very involved in a drama group, which became her passion and through further studies at a drama school she became an actor. She talks about combining her teaching abilities with her love of acting to become an actor in Children's Theatre. She talks about projects in other aspects of her life too: for example, buying a house in the country with her boyfriend and 'doing it up', an activity that encountered financial and legal problems. Her narrative is balanced between the problems encountered and the solutions found. She refers to the role of education throughout, emphasising her experience as the first person in her family to graduate at university level:

Education has been a major (turning point) [...] I've tended always to really go with my instincts, very foolishly some of the time, without a doubt [...] I always felt, that you do have one life and that it is nice to kind of take chances and stretch yourself and things, although it is a bit, it can be scary.

She also states that she consciously does not react to the mother's influences. Her mother is not a role model for her because 'she [her mother] has not done an awful lot with her life [...] she tended to live her life around other people's need'.

In the Italian case n.28IT, the woman doesn't quite remember her childhood: she recalls some episodes: the catholic pre-school when she was four years old: the nuns, the swing set, the afternoon nap, holidays spent to the grandmother's house. She remembers well her friends during primary and secondary schools and her interest in people rather than in studying. She considers very important the driver license that she gained at 18 because of the liberty in choosing a trip destination, the possibility to travel with friends, the autonomy from the family. She gets married at 23 and becomes a mum at 27; the first part of her life is represented as a 'normal life' dedicated to relatives: family life, mother's life, social life. She defines herself 'mature and adult' at 40. In this age:

I matured to an inner tranquility, a peace of mind; I conquer a personal philosophy of life and my own style of life. When you're young, you see all things black or white, after this age you see all the colors and the nuances... I learned to be tolerant.

Her life course seems not to be apparently marked by important transitions or by disruptive events. The mother's death is explained as a grief that needs to be faced. When she was 36, she decided to start working:

At 36, I was sufficiently mature to stay out of home with different people in different situations: it has enabled me to be more responsible. I have acquired a greater confidence in myself, social conscience toward the world and respect for the others. I seem to be able to face life in a soft and easy way, with more trust and less fear toward the future.

Considering the female figures of her life, she says that as a child she started to understand that women can have their role and their personal realization also outside the family, in the civic society. The female teachers, the mother, the grandmother are for her examples of life style. Therefore, she understood the importance of reflecting on choices, decisions, personal responsibilities. At 50 she perceives the aging changes, but she welcomes the gain in emotions and in consciousness that matured with age.

## Discussion

The narrative accounts are elicited as research participants are asked to reflect on their life experiences and in particular on their own representations of their life course and on turning points in their lives. Initial exploration of the full set of personal accounts of adult learning shows how some women portray specific experiences as "activating events" that have the potential to not only trigger new learning orientations (values, attitudes towards learning) but may also change horizons. These changes 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. However, the impact of these shifting orientations on life trajectories, and the degree to which such changes are sustained over time, depend on cultural and systemic factors.

The role of learning is connected to agency in different ways. In English life courses it emerges like an exploration for a personal development built from family and social situations and stimulated by life course events. The women describe formal episodes of learning in adult life that have enabled them either to build directly on school achievements or to follow new job-related paths. But they also indicate other ways in which they have developed new capabilities, often through meeting job challenges and changes. Life course trajectories are shaped through expressions of "bounded agency" (Evans, 2006, 2007), which are often acknowledged to depend upon the enabling

activities of others. For example, the supportive partner or the boss who encourages. In Italian women's narratives, the role of learning is remarked upon only in the first part of the women's life course accounts, and associated to the school periods (infancy, adolescence or young 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. The idea of agency is framed and contextualized according to the ability to deal with ups and downs, events or non-events, that shape the life course.

Where "activating events" are described that have triggered new attitudes and motivations to learn, it is sometimes apparent that pivotal points have been reached in and through significant relationships that have nudged some women towards broadening of their horizons and taking on more challenging roles. In others, recurrent patterns of crisis and the search for stability characterise the ups and downs and turning points of the life course, in culturally-specific ways.

Complex interplay 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 consciously reflective expressions of identity development. Moreover, the combination of strong expressions of learning and agency (high learning and high agency) is evident in accounts which also show capabilities to reflect on and learn from their own lives. The retrospective accounts show how the women's expressions of agency in a life course perspective can be understood as temporal (Emirbayer & 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 (1990), since horizons and imagined futures can be reflectively reformulated and re-imagined through a process of self-learning. 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 consciously reflective. Action and further learning potential are generated through the process of *becoming* consciously and reflectively engaged in self-development. But the narratives also reveal aspects of the conditions and relationships through which women come to express contained, reactive and testing identity profiles. These representations of the environments and relationships are equally telling for an evaluation of the pre-conditions for learning in adult life. Such insights are often missing in assumptions that are made about the self-determination and readiness for learning projects in adult life.

Our analysis of these narratives thus connects identity development with temporal understandings of agency and self-learning through the life course, and allows us to identify how self-representations reflect 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 (Connell, 2002) 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, 2002, p.

139). This applies particularly in the distinctions between and value ascribed to, learning gained through paid and unpaid forms of work, and different types of institution or occupation. 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 (Evans, Behrens & Kaluza, 2000). These inner capabilities, are developed reflexively through experiences in a range of life and work environments. There is potential for learning partners of various types (mentors, counsellors, adult tutors, critical friends) to support people towards the achievement of "critical insight" (Roth, 1971; Stromquist, 2006) into themselves and into the limits and possibilities afforded by their everyday situations and relationships.

## 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. All comparative analysis has a macro-causal dimension (Ragin, 2008) as the macro can be seen in different ways through the lens of the micro: yet the micro examples of biographical negotiation are more than examples of macro forces in action. Some of the women's accounts reflect gendered relations that transcend national boundaries, others are embedded in the prevalent societal conditions and gender regimes of Italy and UK, respectively, with variations according to region (Evans, 2006; Singh, 1998).

Comparative reflections on these temporally embedded, retrospective accounts of lives shaped over the course of half a century also potentially contribute to 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. Variations in the ways in which women narrate the ways in which they move their lives forward reveal inner capabilities that are developed reflexively through experiences and relationships in a range of life and work environments. They also reveal the potential for adult education to incorporate practices that facilitate the telling of life experiences in ways that can better support people towards the achievement of critical insight into these experiences and in learning from their lives. We have shown how the stories people tell about their lives not only reflect what they have learned from their lives but also that the process of telling itself is often indicative of a growing self-awareness and insight, as the construction and narration of their stories becomes part of the learning process (Biesta & Tedder, 2008, p. 2).

Adult educators often hold preconceptions about the starting points for the activation of self-managed learning in adult life. This article has shown the variety of ways in which some women bring consciously reflective habits of mind to their experiences and opportunities; others are pre-reflexively feeling their way. Understanding, from the perspective of the women themselves, the role of activating events and activating relationships in the life-course indicates the importance, for adult education practitioners, of sensitivity to these variations and to the cultural embeddedness of the women's experiences, as they navigate the expectations of particular gender regimes. The research thus supports the case for approaches that facilitate biographical learning to become integral to adult education practices and to the development of adult education

practitioners. The use of drawings also yield some methodological insights into tools that can be used, in both research and practice, in facilitating, elucidating and comparing life course narratives.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The images are coded by country (UK= British cases; IT = Italian cases) and by case number in the wider sample.
- <sup>2</sup> Italian quotes are translated into English from the original transcripts by the authors.
- <sup>3</sup> This is the Italian translation of the idiomatic expression “ora, respiro un po”.

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