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**DOI: 10.38173/RST.2024.28.2.8:93-100**

<b>Title:</b>	<i>LIFE-NARRATIVES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT</i>
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**Section:** Social Science

**Issue:** 2(28)/2024

<b>Received:</b> 15 March 2024	<b>Revised:</b> -
<b>Accepted:</b> 5 August 2024	<b>Available Online:</b> 15 November 2024

Paper available online [HERE](#)

## LIFE-NARRATIVES AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT:

*THE ARGUMENT OF THIS PAPER THAT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, EDUCATION AND THERAPY (ALL ARE GENERIC TERMS THAT WILL BE LATER PRESENTED IN MORE DEPTH) CAN BE USED IN AN ENGLISH CLASS WHEN TEACHING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, BIOGRAPHIES, MEMOIRS AND DIARIES TO INVITE STUDENTS TO ACQUIRE CERTAIN TOOLS THAT ALLOW THEM TO ASSESS CLOSURE BOTH IN THEIR LIVES AND IN THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE THAT IMPACT THEM. SPECIAL FOCUS WILL BE GIVEN TO THE CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK THAT CAN HARBOR, AS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE, A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO IDENTITY, TO THE RESULTS OF NARRATIVE RESEARCH AND THERAPY IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, AND TO THE IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING NON-FICTION LITERATURE TO PROMOTE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT.*

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**KEY WORDS:** BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING, HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, PEDAGOGY

### INTRODUCTION

Autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, and, to a certain extent, diaries appeal to the common reader due to the closure effect they provide to the lives of their authors or of their heroes. Closure, a functional term borrowed from detective stories, signifies the elucidation of a mystery. For most humankind, life itself bears the resemblance of a mystery whose resolution becomes available through various means, such as education, with its plurivocal manifestations that range from empowerment to indoctrination, and therapy. Narrative, in a broad sense, functions as a closure carrier, both regarding education and therapy. At the same time, if both therapy and education are concerned with identity intervention, one to correct it, the other one to enforce it, it follows, in theory at least, that narrative can play an important role in assessing and fixing, if possible, identity issues. Also, life itself gets closure through narrative and, most importantly, narratives themselves seem to be exemplary accounts of individual and collective identities. It is, therefore, the argument of this paper that the connection between narrative, identity, education and therapy (all are generic terms that will be later presented in more depth) can be used in an English class when teaching autobiographies, biographies, memoirs and diaries to invite students to acquire certain tools that allow them to assess closure both in their lives and in the lives of the people that impact them. Like a good investigator in a detective story, in such a class, the students are being

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asked to look for clues, to test different scenarios and various possibilities in their lives in order to evaluate and sustain their own identity development. Special focus will be given to the cultural and educational framework that can harbor, as a viable alternative, a narrative approach to identity, to the results of narrative research and therapy in human development, and to the implications of teaching non-fiction literature to promote human development.

From all aspects of modern and contemporary times that highly influenced and changed the lives of millions and millions of people, the commodization of information, and consequently education, played a crucial role in the transformation of societies. Suddenly, the access to knowledge failed to be the attribute of a few, and raised important issues regarding the extent to which knowledge should be made available to people's needs. The trend coming from the nineteenth century strongly advocated the positivist view that concentrated on cold rationalism, fierce economics, and scientific clarity, in the detriment of humanistic reflection. On the one hand, the direction was controlled and people, prompted by especially scientists and political and economic leaders, came to see the benefits of such an approach when the life conditions improved, life expectancy grew due to advances in medical treatment and social liberation brought about more opportunities and career options. On the other hand, striving for better and more, people had the tendency to become like the machines that initially simplified their work. Slowly they realized that they are different from those machines, that they need more than "fuel" to set things going, that, eventually, positivism was merely part of the answer and not the whole answer. But this is not an anti-utopian picture, but a rather simplistic pattern to show that efficiency in modern and postmodern times is a function of physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being. The downside, in the end, of the positivist scientific paradigm was that it failed to nurture peoples' needs beyond immediate physiologic statistic gratification (food, clothing, vacation, car, house, etc). The alienation of the individual became the norm rather than the exception and a lot of the literary works of modernism depicted just that. The upside, in turn, concentrated on the reconsideration of humanities and mainly of the social sciences (the "positivist" part of humanities), and research in this domain transitioned from the quantitative manner to the qualitative one. Suddenly, people reclaimed and gained back their individuality. And this marked a turn towards a new approach regarding human beings that was advanced by the rise and then fall of totalitarian regimes, the World Wars that divided the map, and by various social workers, the disenfranchising of large segments of population, and the reconsideration of activism for personal and collective rights. It is in these aspects of personal examples that biographies, autobiographies and memoirs can and should provide, if taught, the necessary change in students apprehension of their lives and, consequently, promote identity change.

### **THE TURN TO QUALITATIVE STUDY IN PEDAGOGY**

It seems that the change from a quantitative manner, as a method of research but also as a disciplinary undertaking of educating communities face the difficulties of modern times, toward a qualitative mode of approaching humankind in their individuality happen over a period of several decades and started with the undergoing of a cultural crisis that was identified around the middle of the twentieth century. The positivist paradigm proved unsuccessful in dealing with the new realities at the end of World War II in the Western World. Some cultural critics [1] even suggested that the difficult situations that people went through were closely linked to a misuse of positivist means that were no longer employable in a post-war post-colonial reality. Therefore, the subtlest change from considering the human being as a mere quantifiable entity part of an organism to situating the individual in a qualifying position occurred almost simultaneously with a total new and beneficial approach

of the other. In fact, anthropological study, playing the leading part of a counter-positivist approach, discovered that in a broad sense the observance of remote, closed and uncivilized communities can be applied with similar success to the civilized societies, thus opening whole new possibilities for the account of human development. The advent of postmodernism also challenged the foundations of scientific knowledge and placed once more the individual at the center of a meaning-making revolution by validating the existence of competing and usually contradictory worlds. Moreover, at an educational level, the educators were themselves concerned with a multiplicity of truths and meanings that needed to be taught. Various alternatives and concurrent possibilities divided the decision makers even more. It was here, at a pedagogical level, that positivism finally lost ground to more appropriate individual based approaches. As Robert Kegan [2] argues, the pedagogical and ideological clash opposed two curricular philosophies, *back to basics* and *the whole child*. Following what has been said so far, it can be suggested that Kegan's distinction could easily encompass the difference between what has previously been dubbed as a (literally) quantitative manner and the qualitative mode. The reason for this detour resided in the importance that Kegan himself gives to this later mode, and because of that, little has been said about it. Kegan helps in understanding better the downside of the positive approach and explain in detail what the opposing method represents.

In fact, Kegan's participation in the debate of the epistemological crisis gives new insight to why a positivist approach seems to be outdated and needs to be reformed. In the end, the cultural and educational reform and conformation to the new realities supplied the propagation and promotion of new ways of preparing people to face a highly competitive and complex time. He himself structures his analysis around the *back to basics* and the *whole child* visions, arguing, if not for a middle ground, then certainly for a development approach based not on what students know, but on how they know. In a broader sense, that is what separates positivism from almost everything else. In Kegan's terms, the *back to basics* philosophy draws on "the acquisition of a generic set of cognitive skills that will equip learners for later life tasks, and of an ever-increasing fund of knowledge about the culture, past and present." The critics of this approach accuse it for the "attention to rote learning, memorization, and the uncritical inculcation of the culture's historical values." In contrast, the *whole child* vision recognizes the importance of cognitive development (one of the basic reasons of education) but strives for "equal respect for the students emotional and social development." Even though critics argue the relevance in education of "quasipsychiatric forays into the feelings and valuing of students" and of "social engineering", Kegan still considers this as an alternative to positivism, since it protects students from becoming "captives of our own increasingly mechanized society" and it points out that "the young must not only be smart, but also capable of conviction and self-defined purpose." Moreover, he goes even further and proposes a solution, which might reconcile the two groups and from which students might benefit a great deal more. His idea is to focus on what he calls the growth of the mind and to use in doing so the outcome and teachings of developmental psychology. The valuable side of Kegan's analysis, that goes on to focus on the framework of human mind in early adolescence and young adulthood with the appropriate pedagogical insight, is the attention that the author draws on the three domains that should eventually be covered by any pedagogy. In this respect, the logical-cognitive, the social-cognitive and the interpersonal affective, the three domains that Kegan theorizes, can be successfully harbored by a non-fictional approach in a literature class. The narratives that undergo biographies, memoirs, autobiographies, and diaries may satisfy them all by exposing students to real

bodies of knowledge, reality, history and feelings to make them assess in the end their personal change.

### **ROBERT KEGAN'S HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH**

The reason for quoting Kegan's ideas in implementing psychology-based notions to education bears relevance once his developmental theory is presented. Building on previous developmental theories (Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson), Kegan [3] narrows down the various stages of development around two important issues. His five-stage theory draws upon the object-subject relationship with implications, consequences, and results to each stage. For every individual, Kegan argues, the interplay between the self and the other determines both the rhythm and the quality of human development. In a reductive perspective, development becomes a function of the individuals' capacity of constantly objectifying themselves. Everything depends on the capability of the self to transform into the other by incorporating it and starts with the infants' natural tendencies to incorporate the mother's attitudes and continues all through life until the final interpersonal stage. Each stage consists of two crucial phases. First, there is the ability of the people to differentiate from their own self to appraise it better. Second, once there is a clear distinction between the self and the other, there comes along the second phase, that of incorporating the other. Consequently, each stage's subject becomes part of the next stage's object and thus the evolution goes on. The transition between the stages is realized by evolutionary truces which basically are made of, applying the study's title, the problem the individuals have when differentiating between the self from the other and the process they use in integrating the new acquired self into a superior other. In Kegan's terms, the evolutionary truces are constantly in search of equilibrium between the self and the other, but following a prescriptive movement, which thus becomes the vehicle of development, that requires an emergence from embeddedness (differentiation) immediately followed by a new, supposedly better, embedding process (reintegration). As Kegan notes "Each new evolutionary truce further differentiates the self from its embeddedness in the world, guaranteeing, in a qualitatively new way, the world's distinct integrity, and thereby creating a more integrated relationship to the world. Each new truce accomplishes this by the evolution of a reduced subject and a greater object for the subject to take, an evolution of lesser subjectivity and greater objectivity." (294) Through exposing Kegan's developmental theory in the study of non-fiction literature, it can be argued that this type of narrative is able to provide the qualitative insight that an evolutionary truce entails. Since the relations between the self and the other, between object and subject, contrary to what is expected from non-fiction literature, tend more toward objectivity, the students' exposure to these might play a relevant impact on their own personal development.

Based on Freud's talk therapy which, to a certain extent, parallels the outcome of non-fiction literature in a sense that through self-narrative, which seems to be considered everything but objective, through the interpretation of one's dreams, thoughts, and fears succeeds in identity intervention, narrative therapy can provide closure in serious cases of developmental distress. The relation between Freud, narrative, teaching non-fiction literature and Kegan's developmental theory becomes clear once the interplay between the self and the other is filtered through the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity that characterizes biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and journals. To make a long story short, Freud contributed to the implementation of a functional method to bring solace and comfort when in distress, while Kegan came up with the necessary tools to implement that method. This is not to say that Kegan followed Freud's footsteps. Quite on the contrary, it can be argued that there are more things that separate them than those that unite them. But part of the trend that



denied the *back to basics* pedagogical vision, the advent of narratives as an integral part of curricula, narratives that stimulate the growth of the mind in a *whole child* manner, also meant a reconsideration of psychoanalysis in the sense that the analyst was no longer there to provoke the transference process, but help the analyzed to take a rather objective route in considering their lives instead of a subjective one. In this respect, the new talk therapy started to resemble more and more Kegan's evolutionary truces that secured the transition from one developmental stage to another. By objectifying the problem, or as Michel White in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* put it, externalizing the problem through narrative, patients were more capable to discern themselves and fix the identity, developmental, or mental issues they might have had.

After Kegan realized the importance of applied psychology in education, psychologists understood the relevance of letters, which are part of education, in psychology. This might sound as a truism, but once Freud opened the gates of myths and the possibility of using self-narratives as a means of achieving meaning in life, talk therapy, writing therapy, or narrative therapy started to show their applicability in identity intervention. It might be surprising to note that Freud and Kegan do eventually meet when both consider as a crucial part of people their capacity of meaning making. The abundance of research in this field related to the possibility of people to "re-author" their lives [4] and consequently surpass difficult mental and developmental issues serves as a fundamental proof that that mind growth, not particularly as an educational philosophy, implying cognitive, physiological, and affective development, can easily replace the positivist vision. With different tools and approaches, theorists, academics, and clinicians talk in their research about the benefit for wellbeing propagated by storytelling. A few examples, starting with Theodore Sarbin [5] who advocated narrative as a root metaphor for psychology, continuing with Alan Elms [6] who considered as the focal approach of psychobiography the narrative aspect of a person's life and ending with a group of advised observers of life as Amia Lieblich, Dan McAdams and Ruthellen Josselson who bridged the narrative principles with therapy as well as with theory, suggest the importance that stories people tell about themselves and about the others have in various aspects related to their mental and social security. That is why exposing students to non-fictional literature can harbor, if not social engineering, then at least human development.

Irrespective of the way in which one would frame the representativity of narrative and its curative outcome, both in the real life or in the imaginative life, on thing is certain: by looking back over one's life, making it coherent with a beginning, a development, and an ending, or closure, even the most simple narrative can grasp the identity of the two personas involved in it: the author and the character. Although it has been the psychoanalyst's job to concentrate on the unsaid and show the patient the significance of it, now more and more both the said and the unsaid reflect the coherent attitude that the narrator has or wants to impose over their stories. Any such narrative is not a historical account; therefore it should not focus on what has happened. Similarly, a story like this does not relate to a fictitious event either. But it does in the end situate the author in between history and fiction, empowering them to make sense out of apparently incoherent events. Martha Nussbaum [7] considers that literature is a powerful component that may influence how people construct a better moral and political life for themselves and for the community they live in. By reading novels and by learning how to use both empathy and imagination, Nussbaum argues, people might develop their "ability to imagine what is like to live the life of another person who might, given the circumstances, be oneself or one of one's loved ones." Following Aristotle's point of view, Nussbaum makes a case from literature's power to "invite the readers to put

themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experience.” Even though, the book concentrates on the novel (as a representative narrative about the general human condition as reflected on situations) and its possible effect on the judicial system, Nussbaum’s argument can be extended, as she already implies, to the similar role that might be played by biographies with respect to other domains of the public life. In fact, for her, both historical and biographical works resemble literary works if “they show the effect of circumstances on the emotions and the inner world [which is] a salient part of the contribution of the literary.” This view and the matters discussed so far regarding the virtues of narrative will help present particular ways in which if presented in the English class non-fiction literature can contribute to the human development of the students. Two types of applications will be examined: reader response for biographies and autobiographies and writing response for memoirs and diaries or journals.

### **APPLICATIONS OF BIOGRAPHICAL WRITING**

Kegan’s developmental theory gets its share of application when it comes to the balance objectivity / subjectivity that non-fiction literature presents. Moreover, without stressing the various stages that the students, as well as the authors and the characters, along with the instructor, partake in Kegan’s theory, the focus will be on evolutionary truces that assist the transition from one developmental stage to the other. In concordance with the two-phase movement from one stage to the other, emergence from embeddedness and reintegration, or in a more plausible take following the objectifying of the subject, the first sub-genre to be discussed is that of biography. Due to its convention, a biography resembles a novel, consequently Nussbaum’s analysis of the impact of literary works on moral and political development holds true also for the study of biographies. In addition, the subject of a biography needs to be objectified, since a different person narrates his or her life. Pending on particular biographies, the readers’ response might focus on various aspects. For instance, students might be asked to consider concurrent biographies dedicated to the same person and to pay attention to how a person’s life narrative can change from one epoch to another or from one pattern of interpretation to another (realist perspective vs. gender point of view). In this way students come to realize that while some writers drew on certain aspects of a person’s life, others chose to deal with other aspects. In the end, students understand why and how particular events in famous peoples’ lives bear different patterns of interpretation, thus appreciating with respect to their own lives how possible devastating events might lose ground through narrative. Moreover, once students become familiar with the intricacies of narrative, when one’s life is spelled differently depending on someone else’s perspective, they can open up and consider the ways in which the same person, in the case of autobiographies, undertakes the objectifying of the subject. In this sense, a possible transition from biographies to autobiographies can be set forth by having students read hoax autobiographies in which the authors themselves chose to tell their life story through the use of the third person narrative. The relationship object / subject is much more difficult to seize now since the students are confronted with the real issue of how people use narratives to make meaning in their lives. The same also applies to standard autobiographies, making students reflect on the reasons, motivations and biases the autobiographer had when he or she decided to analyze in more detail a certain aspect of their lives instead of another. This selectivity can then harbor the students’ interest and insight into their own lives and consider which events are worth insisting on and why.

The same can also be applied when memoirs are studied in the classroom. In the case of memoirs, selectivity plays a much more important role and the objectifying of the subject

remains in a way unresolved since a memoir usually does not provide the final closure in the sense that a biography and an autobiography certainly do. Thus, the students apprehend the limited version of life-narratives since authors feel the urge to use writing about something meaningful in their lives in order to be able to move even further. Kegan's insight on evolutionary truces comes into play with a distinct touch. A memoir usually gives separation a new nature, just to be able to provide for the narrator the necessary perspective to reintegrate into a more comprehensive developmental paradigm. Diaries and journals function in a similar manner, the frequent notations being used to clarify the subject's emergence from embeddedness. When exposed to memoirs and journals, students can easily provide a writing response by starting to register their lives on a daily basis. Once they master the technique of representative detail that clarifies critical aspects of their lives, students could start to focus on recurrent issues and to draw the necessary conclusions with regard to their own subjectivity and objectivity. The better they understand how to deal with the cost / benefit analysis of certain events, the sooner they will be able to assess the meaningful side of their own stories. In other words, the sooner they can separate the self from the embedded world, the better it will be for them to use the new reality and try to arrive at a new developmental stage.

### **CONCLUSION**

Further practice and dedication to qualitative studies and their insight into human lives will explain better the role that oral narratives have in individual and collective well-being. To a lesser scale, teaching biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and journals as an example and performance of narrative can help students assess better their own object / subject relations. By constant confrontation with different models of narratives, the students will be able to engage themselves in narratives of their own. After all, re-authoring one's life means nothing more than finding meaning and closure for certain events that otherwise would prevent development.



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