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# TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LIBERATING AND SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE: AN EXPERIMENT WITH “INFORMATION SEEDS”

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## Abstract

From autobiographical narrative to the autobiographical scheme, this article analyses in a first part the concept of autobiography, resilience and storytelling, taking into account the point of view of the prisoner. In the second part, it proposes an exploratory approach to autobiography based on research on elementary units of meaning called information seeds. The challenge is to initiate a positive, liberating and inclusive transformation based on the organization of information.

**Keywords:** autobiography, resilience, storytelling, social inclusion, information seed, psycho-social transformation

## Introduction

The Erasmus project “*The Chrysalis and the Butterfly*” aims to «set up an autobiographical activity inside prisons to promote and encourage reconsideration of one’s past and planning for the future ‘beyond bars’».

The overall project of our presentation is to see how experimenting with a new method of organizing information resulting from research on the transformation of organizations (Lacombe, 2021) is likely to contribute to this objective of mental and psychological liberation, and social inclusion. To do this, before detailing the different stages of this new method of organizing information resulting from research on the transformation of organizations (Lacombe, 2021), we will include it in its logical

environment by successively examining the notions of autobiography, resilience and storytelling.

## From autobiographical narrative... Autobiography and meaning

Autobiography etymologically designates the fact of writing about oneself, defined among other authors by Philippe Lejeune (1975) as a «*retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence, when he emphasizes on his individual life, in particular on the history of his personality*». Literary genre in its own right, many writers, politicians, religious, philosophers<sup>2</sup> have devoted themselves to this type of writing under different names: Journal, Confessions, Memoirs, Essays, but all these works have in common the alliance of three “I’s”, the author, the narrator and the main character. They are also supposed to conform to what P. Lejeune (1975) called the “autobiographical pact”. It is a kind of implicit agreement where the author undertakes to tell the truth about his life and not to distort the reality of the facts. There is the border which, classically, separates autobiography from fiction.

But it is not a question of a simple return to oneself: beyond an exercise in memory, or a re-memory of the highlights of one’s past, the autobiographical approach has another dimension, that of a search for the meaning of life. This is what Georges Gusdorf (1990) develops in his book *Auto-biography* «*The*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.leinterferenze.it/progetto-erasmus2/la-crisalide-e-la-farfalla/>

<sup>2</sup> Saint Augustin, Montaigne, C de Gaulle, Anne Frank, JP Sartre, JJ Rousseau and many others.

*life story in its authenticity is not a recapitulation of what took place, but necessarily an interpretation, that is to say, a work of oneself on oneself. Writing itself plays in the circumstance a role of active intervention; the self-writer does not contemplate himself "in the mirror of writing".» (p. 383)*

Writing is not a mirror, but an instrument of intelligibility on the path from self to self. Montaigne (1580) declared about the Essays "I myself am the subject of my book", but this introspection, going beyond the sole consideration of his personal trajectory, has in fact supported him in his reflection on the nature of the human condition.

By giving prisoners the opportunity to enter into this particular type of writing that is autobiography, beyond the work of memory and testimony, we offer them another quest. Going back in his life course, the prisoner, starting from the exploration of the path "from self to self" will be led by reconsidering his past to reconsider himself. In other words, it is a process of recovery of self-esteem, of capacity for reconstruction otherwise called resilience.

## Resilience and self-exposure

Very popular today, this concept of resilience was developed by Boris Cyrulnik in 1999 in numerous works whose ideas have been widely disseminated in the media (2009). Neuropsychiatrist and psychoanalyst, he defines resilience as a capacity to adapt following a trauma and emphasizes the importance of the writing in this process. For example, in a situation of armed conflict, soldiers who can write what they are going through, even if no one reads them, show much less psychotraumatic sequelae than those who have not had the opportunity to express themselves.

More recently, Serge Tisseron (2021) has highlighted the multiple forms and variations of resilience which covers very diverse conceptions and underlines the difference between the resilience of inert systems which is the fact of returning to a previous state, while a human affected by a trauma always rebuilds himself differently from what he was before. It is therefore the ability to overcome the effects of a disaster. He also distinguishes the resilience of individuals and that of communities, which indirectly makes it possible to deal with the resilience of all. The creation of websites where people can tell what they have experienced is a way of increasing both the resilience of a community and that of each of its members without stigmatizing

anyone. Writing is therefore recognized for its cathartic virtues, its ability to release one's emotions and one can imagine a deployment of writing methods that can adopt different media by using digital, but also comics<sup>3</sup> or theatrical and even non-verbal expression (gestural, mime or plastic arts.)

In his book *Resilience: A look that brings life*, Michel Manciaux (2001: 321-330) shows that more than a posture of assistance, people in difficulty potentiate the dynamics of evolution thanks to the change of look that society, social and health professionals have on them, but also the way they look at themselves. «Self-esteem is one of the protective factors at play in the development of resilience, which is reinforced by overcoming hardships: a real virtuous circle that creates resilience.». He also points out the risks «linked to the possible misappropriation, or even recovery, of resilience by professionals: because a child, a young person, a family demonstrates resilience, considering that they are now capable of coping on their own. The risk of government disengagement is of the same order.»

The other side of the mirror is indeed not to be neglected: if there is self-expression, there is also self-exposure, denudation, and therefore to a certain extent, the possibility of endangering persons who, by definition, are fragile because the prison environment is a microcosm, where violence too often reigns and where interactions, priorities and values differ from those of society. Writing in prison exposes and even overexposes the author. This is shown by *Un abri-livre – Expérience en prison*, where Philippe Ripoll (2005) has brought together a dozen writings by prisoners, «a set of testimonies, cries, efforts, trials, patient constructions.... a set submitted to a listening experience... But it is a discreet practice, if not secret. The social pressure of the group, the socio-legal pressure... and the deep feeling of insecurity in prison oblige the writer to protect himself, to preserve himself.»

This is why in this need to communicate to third parties with a view to self-reconsideration and social inclusion (Barrère & Mairesse, 2015; Saurier,

<sup>3</sup> See the paper of Laurence Houot, (19-03-2022), Festival d'Angoulême: comment l'autobiographie est-elle devenue une tendance lourde du 9e art? France Télévision. Rédaction culture. [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/bd/festival-de-bd-d-angouleme/festival-d-angouleme-comment-l-autobiographie-est-elle-devenue-une-tendance-lourde-du-9e-art\\_5027586.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/bd/festival-de-bd-d-angouleme/festival-d-angouleme-comment-l-autobiographie-est-elle-devenue-une-tendance-lourde-du-9e-art_5027586.html)

2018), it may be interesting to take into account a new dimension, that of the fictional part of any writing grounded in personal life experience. “Every autobiography is a fiction”. This is what Chris Ware, Grand Prix 2021 of the Angoulême Comics Festival, says. He even believes that fiction presents more reality than non-fiction.

In effect, fiction engages its author in a construction, in a staging that gives life to the persons – who have become characters – who evolve in these universes. This is why it seems interesting to consider the contribution that storytelling can represent (Denning, 2000), in the work of writing offered to prisoners. In a previous publication, from the narrative dimension to the fabrication of the myth the leverage effect of storytelling in communication (Vieira, 2018), we underlined the interest of this kind of production which makes it possible to move from a linear narrative dimension to the manufacture of more open sets, with a desire for construction and communication to third parties.

## Storytelling

«Literally, storytelling consists of telling a story in order to win the support of an audience, whatever the field concerned. It can be used to improve the image, audience and prestige of an institution or organization, but its most widespread use is in commercial activities. Widely used in the advertising context, it is a marketing process that aims to increase sales by giving the brand a specific personality, by promoting its history, its values and its know-how.» (Vieira, 2018).

Storytelling techniques have been applied for a very long time under other names (tales, narrations, narratives, etc). What today constitutes ST as an innovative technique is its use on multiple digital media (websites, platforms, social networks) allowing the potential of text, image and sound to be combined.

Thus, moving from a “classic” autobiographical approach to the production of self-expression in storytelling would combine several advantages:

- The cathartic dimension would be retained because any writing process generates a “purging of passions” and therefore has a liberating effect.
- Personal overexposure would be less strong since reality and fiction are intertwined.
- The emotional dimension, which plays

a key role in the reception of any message, is not, however, erased. It can express itself more freely thanks to the release of the imagination.

- The appeal of using digital technologies with an innovative positive image should not be overlooked.
- The fictional story has the effect of captivating the audience to the point of making them partly forget the realities of everyday life.
- The construction resulting from the imagination obliges to come out of the withdrawal into oneself and to take a step towards the other to capture their interest. A very useful approach when it comes to preparing for the “after prison” and showing creativity, know-how, dynamism.

Without ignoring the material and support resources that this requires, or the difficulties currently encountered in prisons to give prisoners access to digital tools, this STN (digital storytelling) track seems particularly promising to us.

## ...to the autobiographical scheme Meaning and organization

Of the three approaches to autobiography – historical study, psychological study and literary study – storytelling leads us to favour the second, the bringing into play of «*vast problems, such as those of memory, personality construction and self-analysis*» (Lejeune, 1975, p. 7). In this author’s definition of autobiography (see above), however, we reject prose and its linearity to propose a reticular form in order to produce a graph connecting units of meaning, keeping the important information in the image of the memorization process at work in the brain. It should be noted that the numeric remains optional in the initialization phase of the graph.

The French term for meaning is «*sens*» which has three complementary meanings: sensibility, intelligibility and direction (Cassar, 2015). Thus, meaning, which is nourished by a sensitivity to a diversity of forms, emerges through the integration of signals and signs, to instil a coherent direction in the organism. Meaning is not unique and has a paradoxical relationship with non-sense (Deleuze, 1969). And «*If meaning is linked to a materiality that carries it, it seems that this is only possible to the extent that this materiality has a certain organization*» (Chazal, 2000, p. 51). It is this relationship between meaning and organization that we are examining.

Let us recall that to organize consists of «*combining (the elements of a whole) in a certain way*» (CNRTL), i.e., putting in place adequate relations to arrange harmoniously or make operational. Organization unfolds at different levels producing bodies or organisms – themselves composed of organized structures, the organs – which evolve in a social context made up of organizations: companies, associations, institutions, etc. Organization mixes the organization of matter, the “doing”, but also the organization of information. The paradox of meaning thus affects the work of organizations (Bonnet *et al.*, 2015). However, as these have generally been organized on the basis of intensive exploitation of limited resources without really caring about negative externalities, the Cartesian scientific method at the source of technical progress must be questioned.

Indeed, the second precept «*to divide each of the difficulties I would examine into as many parts as possible, and as many as would be required to solve them better*» (Descartes, 1637) has a critical effect: the operation of division cuts a link potentially destroying a relationship that makes sense, especially by considering the living as an insensitive and controllable machine. This mathematical thinking – structuring, operative and projective – needs to be deepened in order to recover degrees of freedom. It is a question of distinguishing between the often-confused notions of variety and dimension: the straight line and the curve are of variety 1 but the straight line is inscribed in a space of dimension 1, whereas the curve is inscribed in a space of dimension 2 (a plane) or 3 (a volume). Reducing the modelling of a trajectory by a straight line or projecting an event onto a plane limits the degrees of freedom, inducing unattainable ideals, for example infinite progress or growth, and a competitive mode of operation favouring the development of omnipotence with deleterious effects (enslavement, generalized surveillance...).

The fork in the road that will allow us to leave the path traced is facilitated by an open plan and a multidimensional representation. The situation of imprisonment is therefore not limited to the imprisonment of bodies but includes the imprisonment of thought. In a prison situation, the deprivation of physical freedom constrains the development of sensibility: prison denaturation (Chamond *et al.*, 2014) incarcerates thought (Lamothe, 2003). However, intelligibility can

develop from imaginary spaces of freedom, by resorting to the memory of a previous space to construct, for example, from an autobiographical account, a projection that can fit in with a meaningful societal development.

This is a work of reintegration. Mathematically, integration seeks to measure an entity by dividing it into representative elementary units whose sum will best approximate the result. The proposed process is similar: gather elementary units that make sense by resonance with reality, then assemble them to form a network of meaning.

## Information seeds, units of meaning

The description model is based on a reduced set of elementary units of meaning, called “information seeds”. The seeds fall into two categories, *descriptors* and *interpreters*. The descriptors are concrete markers that make it possible to describe a situation by crossing two axes, one operational, translated by “who-does-what” evoking the canonical structure of the sentence (subject, verb, complement), the other organizational on 3 levels, “body-context-heart”, thus producing 9 species of descriptors.

The “body level” distinguishes three first entities: 1. the “body of who” symbolizes indifferently an actor, a person, an animal, a living being, a robot, or even any personified object to which is attributed a capacity of autonomous action; 2. the “body of does” translates the event or the situation, of a minimal continuous duration, such as an encounter, a meeting, a user experience; 3. the “body of what” or resource, can designate a production, a work, a realization, such as, for example, a document.

The “context level”, which is external, follows the same structure and is articulated with the previous level according to a multiplicative operation. In the continuity of the resource, the following are thus considered: 4. the “context of the koi” or service that allows the generation or processing of a set of resources, for example, taking the example of the book, are considered the services provided by the publishing house that publishes several works, the printing house that produces them, the distribution platform that distributes them, the bookstore that sells them or the media library that lends them out, right up to the recycling centre that recovers unsold copies; 5. the “context of the fe” groups

together a series of events or situations that respond to a common purpose; it designates the project, the programme or the mission; 6. the “context of ki” represents any group of actors, whatever its size (a pair or couple is already a group), an individual being potentially linked to different groups.

The “heart level” is part of an internal register: 7. the “heart of who” expresses the capacity, the potential of the actor or the group, attached to their role or mission, translating a competence; 8. the “heart of does” designates the action, an elementary temporal unit, knowing that only the actions that are significant for the discourse are memorized; 9. the “heart of what” represents the idea, the objective, the intention, translating a reason for being.

In addition to these 9 species of descriptors, there is the interpreter, 0. the “concept”, an abstraction designating a category, a theme or a keyword. The 10 seed species are identified by the same reduced set of attributes, in particular contextualisation attributes, such as domain, author, space or time, which are therefore not represented by seeds. The order of description is left free, the attributes remain optional. By analogy with the seed in botany, an information seed is a concentrate. It develops by putting it into relationships, thus forming a multidimensional structure, a graph called a schema, comparable to a rhizome. The relationships between the seeds can be reduced to three types: the transformation factor, which expresses a change (temporally oriented link), the organization’s tuner (strong, organic link) and the informational correlator (weak, analogical link). A change of objective is thus expressed by two seeds “9.” linked by a transformation factor, the end date of the first corresponding to the start date of the second.

## The challenge of implementation

The information seeds do not originate from research on autobiographical narrative nor are they related to the prison environment, but their potential for breaking out of a confining framework of thought leads us to consider their application to this context, which will require the involvement of specialist practitioners.

If the first challenge was to convey the rationale for this proposal (the why), the second is to illustrate the implementation process (the how). To initiate this, we give in Box 1 an example that will speak to most people, that of the description of a sports meeting, illustrated by Figure 1.

*Box 1 - example of the use of information seeds: description of a sports event, the France-Portugal match on 23 June 2021.*

The “point of view” depicted focuses on the context and the results. It illustrates the use of the 10 species of seeds (noted from q0 to q9) and the 3 types of relationships (noted X, Y and Z). A seed corresponds to a node of a graph, a relationship to an edge between two nodes. The coding uses the CYPHER language of Neo4j (see <https://neo4j.com/docs/cypher-manual/current/>). Seeds are numbered (from g1 to g18) to specify relationships such as (g1)-[r:Y]-(g2). The properties of the seeds are optional, between braces. They are common to all 10 species: n=name, d=description, p=place, b=begin, e=end, j=join.

- (g1:q0{n: "sport"}); (g2:q0{n: "football"}); (g3:q0{n: "contest"})
- (g4:q5{n: "Euro 2021",d: "UEFA European Football Championship 2020", b:20210611,e:20210711});(g1)-[r:Y]-(g2);(g2)-[r:Y]-(g4);(g3)-[r:Y]-(g4)
- (g5:q4{n: "press coverage",j: "https://fr.uefa.com/uefaeuro-2020/match/2024476--portugal-vs-france/"}); (g4)-[r:X]-(g5)
- (g6:q6{n: "France team"}); (g7:q6{n: "Portugal team"})
- (g8:q2{n: "match june 23",d: "match 35, France - Portugal",p: "Budapest, Bulgaria",b:20210623});(g4)-[r:Z]-(g8)
- (g9:q3{n: "Ferenc-Puskás Stadium",p: "47° 30' 11" N, 19° 05' 53" E",b:2017}); (g9)-[r:X]-(g8)
- (g10:q9{n: "qualification"}); (g8)-[r:X]-(g10)
- (g11:q1{n: "Karim Benzema"}); (g12:q7{n: "French striker"})
- (g13:q1{n: "Cristiano Ronaldo"}); (g14:q7{n: "Portuguese striker"})
- (g11)-[r:Z]-(g13)-[r:Z]-(g6); (g13)-[r:Z]-(g14)-[r:Z]-(g7)
- (g15:q8{n: "penalty goal 30'"});(g14)-[r:X]-(g15)
- (g16:q8{n: "penalty goal 45'+2'"});(g12)-[r:X]-(g16)
- (g17:q8{n: "goal 47'"});(g12)-[r:X]-(g17)
- (g18:q8{n: "penalty goal 60'"}); (g14)-[r:X]-(g18)



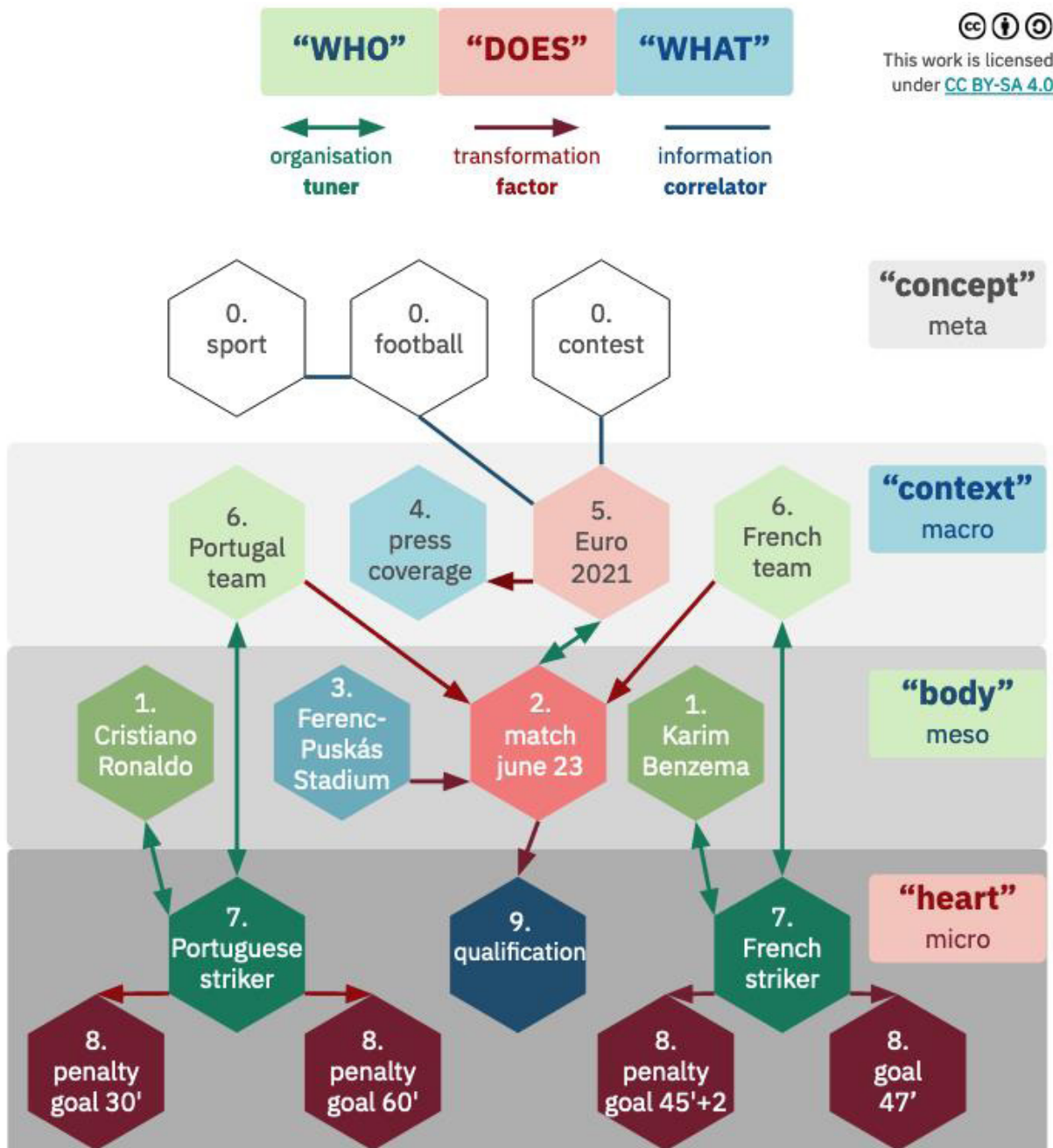


Fig. 1: illustration of the football example

The language of information seeds makes it possible to describe a situation from any starting point. The representation will take the form of a graph, consisting of nodes and edges, of seeds in relationships. The graph can be initiated using a paper medium, for example post-it notes, with one note per seed. There is no limit to the size of the graph. Its development reflects the personal point of view of its author. The detailed aspects reflect a sensitivity to a given subject. A seed can have several relations, depending on the author of the graph. If the organization of the produced diagram is personal, however there are good practices. We give an example: the direct relationship between an actor (q1) and a group (q6) is incomplete. By introducing a role (q7) between the two, the purpose of the actor in the group becomes meaningful. The graph can then be traversed in both directions: Actor > Role > Group, or Group > Role > Actor.

## In conclusion

To summarize, the proposed description model is based on a reduced set of descriptors whose combination with the help of three elementary relations allows the construction of an infinite number of stories. The assembly of these elementary units of meaning, called “seeds of information”, produces a graph that goes beyond the simple linear narrative dimension. This hypertextual representation is constructed without an imposed framework. It offers a multitude of entry points, which can help to better understand the complexity of life courses and exposes a set of links that allow the (re)construction of meaning. The human being is at the centre of this system because the units of information manipulated are directly (com)prehensible. The expression of a point of view in a common vocabulary facilitates the analysis of narratives, and their interconnection to organizational information systems. Compared to the classic autobiographical narrative, various gains can thus be envisaged *a priori*, both at the individual and societal levels: 1) identifying shortcomings to help rebuild identity, 2) linking the narrative to actionable potentials upon release from prison by linking identified skills with compatible demands, 3) creating social ties by sharing common happy experiences or expectations, 4) analysing identity construction in relation to Erikson’s stage of

psycho-social development (1998), 5) formalizing the understanding of factors negatively influencing life courses to refine the orientation of preventive actions. These points deserve further development.

Questioning the issue of social inclusion from a dynamically structured autobiographical narrative, this introductory article has merely marked out the first stages of a possible experimentation of information seeds applied to biography in a prison environment, specifying their *raison d’être* and outlining a process.

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