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Qualitative Social Work

The relevance of biographic narratives for social workers' professional memory, reflexivity and identity

Journal:	<i>Qualitative Social Work</i>
Manuscript ID	QSW-20-0066.R1
Manuscript Type:	Main Paper
Keywords:	Oral history, Critical reflection, Identity, Biography, Narrative
Abstract:	<p>The present article is about the use of biographic methods in the framework of oral history, and its contribution to developing processes of critical reflection and reflexivity. It is based on a set of oral data collected from Portuguese social workers who had played an active role during the revolutionary phase that marked the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Portugal (following the 25th April 1974 military coup). The article explores how the use of biographic methods (integrated within a historical methodological framework), other than simply producing accounts of past experiences, allowed interviewees to re-capture, re-interpret and re-signify their own experiences in the light of changing professional paradigms and socio-political arrangements. It will demonstrate how resorting to oral history methods can contribute to produce critical self-reflective accounts, allowing intra-professional tensions, self-expectations, beliefs and disenchantment, as well as professional identification and deidentification to surface. Four examples will be presented that reveal how favouring an approach based on three interrelated aspects - oral history, biographic methods, narrative analysis - allows perceiving individual dispositions, its construction and the influence they have on the subjects' relation with the canons of professional practice, while showing the ambiguities around professional representations and identification.</p>

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3 **The relevance of biographic narratives for social workers' professional memory,**
4 **reflexivity and identity**
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33 **Abstract:**
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35 The present article is about the use of biographic methods in the framework of oral
36 history, and its contribution to developing processes of critical reflection and reflexivity.
37
38 It is based on a set of oral data collected from Portuguese social workers who had played
39 an active role during the revolutionary phase that marked the transition from dictatorship
40 to democracy in Portugal (following the 25th April 1974 military coup). The article explores
41 how the use of biographic methods (integrated within a historical methodological
42 framework), other than simply producing accounts of past experiences, allowed
43 interviewees to re-capture, re-interpret and re-signify their own experiences in the light
44 of changing professional paradigms and socio-political arrangements. It will demonstrate
45 how resorting to oral history methods can contribute to produce critical self-reflective
46 accounts, allowing intra-professional tensions, self-expectations, beliefs and
47 disenchantment, as well as professional identification and deidentification to surface.
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3 Three examples will be presented that reveal how favouring an approach based on oral
4 history, biographic methods and narrative analysis allows perceiving individual
5 dispositions, its construction and the influence they have on the subjects' relation with
6 the canons of professional practice, while showing the ambiguities around professional
7 representations and identification.
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16 **Keywords:** oral history, biographic narratives, critical reflection, narrative analysis,
17 identity
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21 22 23 **Introduction**

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26 The present article revolves around the contribution of oral history and biographic inquiry
27 to collecting social workers' social and professional memory, and, in particular, its ability
28 to induce reflexivity and identity framing. The article will explore the relationship between
29 oral history and biographic methods and narrative analysis, critical reflection, reflexivity
30 and identity (re)framing, based on three examples taken from an ongoing research. The
31 empirical ground is a set of biographic interviews collected from Portuguese social
32 workers who were actively engaged in some of the most progressive programmes,
33 projects and events developed in Portugal after the 1974 Revolution, when the country
34 transited from dictatorship to democracy (Silva, 2019b).
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46 The purpose here is not to produce an in-depth critical analysis of the narratives and the
47 results attained, but to explore how the methodological framework based on oral history,
48 biographic methods and a narrative analysis approach induced critical reflection,
49 reflexivity and identity discourses in the subjects. Initially, the option of collecting oral
50 histories was not thought to encourage critical reflections, much less reflexivity from the
51 interviewed subjects. In fact, it was during interview collection and later when the
52 accounts were being analysed, that it became clear informants were producing
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3 discourses that highlighted points of rupture in their biographies whilst signalling the
4 socio-political circumstances that influenced their life options and biographic trajectory.
5 Besides identifying those moments and reflecting about them, some interviewees
6 produced elaborate discourses on how they reasoned and dealt with professional
7 identity, not just regarding the past, but also manifesting their position in relation to
8 present-day professional situation and their personal identification – and in some cases,
9 deidentification – with the profession.
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18 The next section will focus on clarifying the conceptual framework, elucidating the
19 importance of the critical reflection-reflexivity nexus in social work research and practice,
20 and shedding light on the relationship between the latter and biographic methods and
21 oral history. Then, the research context and methodological framework on which this
22 paper is based will be addressed, followed by three examples of critical reflection,
23 reflexivity and identity framing taken from the empirical data set.
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31 **From oral history and biographic methods to critical reflection and identity in** 32 **social work research** 33 34

35 *Oral history and social work research* 36 37

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39 Though relatively marginal to social work research, resorting to oral history sources goes
40 back to the earliest days of the profession, when 19th century social reformists like
41 Charles Booth, Octavia Hill or Beatrice Webb used historical oral accounts in their
42 surveys (Thompson, 2000). Oral history was present in social work historical research
43 before the 1950s, when research methodology in this profession was far more pluralistic
44 than one might consider (Fisher and Dybicz, 1999), but it declined to a point of near
45 invisibility, though. The staggering influence of logical positivism on mainstream social
46 work prompted a fixation with scientific validity and reliability, hindering the use of history
47 approaches in general and in particular of oral history sources as far as social work
48 research is considered (Guiraldelli, 2013). Oral history, in the context of the social
49 sciences and history itself, fought against similar accusations and endured a battle to
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3 seek a recognition that was to be conquered only in the 1960s (Williams, 2018), as ethno-
4 methodologies and microhistory developed.
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8 Historical research within social work was revived in the 1980s and 1990s, partly driven
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10 by the narrative turn (Riessman, 2001a; Riessman and Quinney, 2005) and thanks to
11
12 the emergence of a critical re-examining of the profession (Fisher and Dybicz, 1999) and
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14 the historical ties to the political contexts and world-systems which had been framing
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16 social work's trajectory throughout time (Lorenz, 1994, 2007).
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19 Interestingly, from the 1990s onwards, oral history has acquired space in social work as
20
21 an instrument to support practice. Its relevance for social workers had already been
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23 implied by the sociologist and historian Thompson (2000), who signalled its
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25 instrumentality for therapeutic ends. From within the profession, the contribution of oral
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27 history to practice, namely in terms of intervention with older adults, traumatized patients
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29 or children, was explored by Martin (1995, 1999) who saw it as a means not only to
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31 counter the depersonalization often caused by psychodynamic methods but also to
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33 convey information about (and from) underrepresented groups. When using oral history
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35 in social work research, professionals are not just invited to speak about themselves.
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37 While doing it, they give voice to those who crossed their path of practice, bringing to the
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39 front-stage of research the singularities of people enduring harsh living conditions
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41 (Guiraldelli, 2013). For Martin (1995: 142), oral history was also fundamental to 'fill gaps
42
43 in [the] historical literature' of the discipline and the profession. More recently, Williams
44
45 (2018) showed how oral history can be used by social workers to produce and sustain
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47 participatory and empowering practices and De Wilde et al., (2020: 95) called the
48
49 attention to the role oral history may have in questioning and critically deconstructing
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51 contemporary 'politics of apology'.
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55 Grounded on a dialectic perspective, Guiraldelli (2013) counters the critics of oral history
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57 for its excessive focus on the micro-sociological level and its dependence on the
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59 contingencies of personal life facts. In his view, oral history allows thinking the profession
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3 critically and reflectively in its singularities and in connection with the universality and
4 totality of complex social life. In that sense, oral history allows perceiving the
5 particularities not just of social workers within their personal and professional lives, but
6 also the interactions and powerplays they establish with the recipients of their
7 intervention, their professional peers and other social actors, as well as with policy
8 frameworks and socio-political and economic structures. With the support of biographic
9 methods, oral history does more than granting access to individual past experiences,
10 insofar as it positions 'speakers within networks of social and cultural expectations'
11 (Hyvärinen, 2008: 457).
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22 *Oral history, biographic methods and critical reflection*

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25 The use of oral history in social work should not be seen as an end in itself, but rather
26 as a means to understand complex social life and the relations professionals establish
27 within that complexity. Relying on narrative processes, oral history becomes a powerful
28 tool to unearth critical reflective accounts, as subjects reminisce over their interactions
29 over time, appraising and reconstructing their pasts. Here, oral history becomes the
30 vehicle of an interpretive enterprise undertaken and shared by both the subject and the
31 researcher. While often prompting biographic narrations, oral history invites producing
32 more than a mere account of facts; it offers an interpretation of life experiences
33 (Hyvärinen, 2008).
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45 Following this interpretive footpath, oral history and biographic methods take the
46 researcher beyond the thresholds of descriptive inquiry, enabling us to see reality in a
47 phenomenological perspective as biographic trajectories reveal the moments of crisis,
48 the ruptures (Caetano, 2011) and the contexts of decision-making (whether instilling
49 changes, or maintaining existing options). In the context of sociological and historical
50 research of professions, social professions included, life histories collected through oral
51 history grant the researcher access to the making of alternative professional projects and
52 to the mediations and/or ruptures with the mainstream. This idea brings us closer to the
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3 notion that biographic narratives are particularly useful to reach not just stigmatised,
4 marginalised and less empowered actors. As Thompson (2000) suggested and
5 Schiettecat et al. (2018) have demonstrated in their study on mobilities in and out of
6 poverty, life histories can also provide access to the accounts of other less visible and
7 'rarely heard narrators' (Shaw and Holland, 2014: 151), like in the case of this research,
8 social workers.
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16 The narratives generated through biographic inquiry are highly prone to produce critical
17 reflection and reflexivity. Both have become key in social work research and practice
18 (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Nygren and Blom, 2001; Shaw and Holland, 2014) especially
19 after the 1980s, in the wake of post-modern and post-structural debates and, later, critical
20 realism (Burack-Weiss, 2017; Healy, 2005; Houston, 2001; Longhofer and Floersch,
21 2012; Witkin, 2012). Here, the terms critical reflection and reflexivity are not to be used
22 interchangeably. To differentiate both concepts, I rely on D'Cruz, Gillingham, and
23 Melendez (2007) who, based on Schon's (1983) distinction between *reflection-on-action*
24 and *reflection-in-action*, suggest critical reflection occurs when critical incidents are
25 evoked by the subjects and knowledge is produced around that process of
26 remembrance. Because the 'critical incident is firmly in the past, and is represented as a
27 learning opportunity for the future' (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007: 83), critical reflection diverges
28 from reflexivity, insofar as the latter represents a critical form of knowledge production
29 that is founded in close time proximity to the subject's experience, whilst the former sits
30 in a broader time frame, i.e., more entrenched in the past. From this perspective, critical
31 reflection can be understood as a process particularly suitable for bridging individual
32 action and the socio-historical context.
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52 Presenting critical reflection in these terms brings one to Archer's (2003) concept of
53 reflexivity as a mediating mechanism between structure and agency. As such, the
54 internal conversations produced by the individuals, when asked to narrate their
55 biographies, become *reflexive* as subjects reveal mutual causal relations between
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3 structures and actors. This subjectification of personal and interpersonal experience
4 offered by biographic narratives presents a window to observe identity formations
5 (Dubar, 1998; Hall and White, 2005; Shaw and Holland, 2014).
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10 Being reflexive means becoming able to critically reflect on actions and interactions and,
11 based on that, to act in the world (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007). This can be attained through
12 biographic narratives, as they have the power to produce (or induce) critical reflexion
13 and reflexivity (Dubar, 2006). What I am referring to is a process of self-induced
14 reconstitution of actions and interactions which allows the identification of biographic
15 ruptures (Lahire, 2005, 2008). When doing so, subjects can do more than simply
16 reappraising their deeds, they can instil changes in their future action, shaping and
17 reshaping identity. However, not belittling the capacity biographic inquiry has to turn
18 biographic narratives into reflexivity (Dubar, 2006), if one is to address reflexivity in its
19 full extent, other than identifying critical episodes and incidents (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2007),
20 individuals' narratives should substantiate points of rupture in their biographies in a
21 highly descriptive manner (Caetano, 2015) and produce propositional discourses and
22 conceive possible lines of action (Archer, 2003).
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38 **Using oral history to produce biographic and professional narratives: contextual** 39 **and methodological frameworks** 40

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42 As mentioned earlier, this article draws on an ongoing research on the participation of
43 social workers in the process of transition from right-wing conservative dictatorship to
44 constitutional democracy in the 1970s in Portugal. It was a process launched by a military
45 coup led by mid-rank officers on April 25th 1974, which overthrew the 48-year-old
46 nationalist repressive regime. In the almost two years that followed the coup, a series of
47 radical political, social and economic changes affected the country, leading to direct
48 democracy practices, massive social reforms to recognise and protect labour and civil
49 rights, the nationalisation of private economic assets and companies, not forgetting the
50 independence of African and Asian territories under Portuguese colonial administration.
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3 This stage was to be called PREC, a Portuguese acronym for Revolutionary Process
4 Under Way, a period which harboured a diversity of participatory social and political
5 experiences and progressive programmes. It was also a time of political turmoil, civic
6 unrest and vast collective mobilisation. This radicalisation, which brought Portugal to the
7 brink of civil war, was stopped by a counter-revolutionary coup led by moderate army
8 officers in November 1975, paving the way to what was to become Portugal's multi-party
9 constitutional democracy. The aim of this research is to identify and interview social
10 workers who willingly and actively participated in those Revolutionary programmes and
11 contexts, collecting and analysing the memories they held from those experiences.
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14 From 2016 to 2018, 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13
15 women and one man. The interview guides were thought to be as flexible as possible to
16 provide interviewees with the autonomy to report, describe and elaborate on issues they
17 saw relevant. Though not initially conceived to prompt internal conversations (Archer,
18 2003), the interview guides included topics that somehow invited the subjects to
19 elaborate on their current concerns and on how they understood the changes in the
20 profession in particular and in society in general. The presence of such questions in
21 certain points of the guides were, indeed, able to initiate the internal dialogues (Caetano,
22 2015), which turned the biographic inquiry into a critical reflective instrument. All
23 interviews but two were collected in a single session, which lasted from two to five hours.
24 Regarding the double session interviews, one took four hours total and the other 10
25 hours total.
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28 Though critical reflections pervaded all the testimonies, it was the two subjects whose
29 interviews occurred in two separate sessions (with a two-week interval between the first
30 and the follow-up interview) who developed more critical and reflexive insights. Without
31 disregarding each interviewee's idiosyncrasies, the result was highly influenced by their
32 having been interviewed twice. On the second session, both subjects inadvertently
33 started the interview on their own without being asked to, resuming topics and ideas they
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3 had been turning over in their minds after their first session. The second encounter
4 allowed revisiting the issues, episodes and rationalisations which were invoked in the
5 earlier meeting, producing not just a re-narration, but also a critical reasoning of
6 previously told facts. A circumstance which should not to be regarded as strange
7 because, as Frank (2012: 37) notes, concerning the dialogical nature of narrative
8 analysis, 'people tell stories in order to revise their self-understanding, and any story
9 stands to be revised in subsequent stories'. If the first interview prompted an encounter
10 with the subjects' past, allowing more descriptive elements to emerge, the second one
11 allowed a reflection about the facts, deeds and interactions of the past, thus adding more
12 historicity to the process and leading to the identification of multiple points of rupture in
13 the subjects' life trajectories, a condition closely tied to the production of reflective
14 narratives, as mentioned by Dubar (2006).¹

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29 In terms of research, the data gathered during the interviews was analysed using two
30 distinct methods. Initially, the transcribed material was subjected to categorial content
31 analysis. On a second phase, those very same interviews underwent narrative analysis,
32 which resulted in a more clear surfacing of critical reflection and identity. Fragmented by
33 the coding process, the information allowed cross subject comparison and interesting
34 analytic scrutiny, considering the topics of the discussion. However, dense critical
35 reflection, reflexivity and identity (re)framing became evident once the subjects'
36 discourse was analysed *in continuum*, as a 'whole' (Frank, 2012: 43). This was not a
37 surprise, considering the limitations of inductive thematic coding when compared to
38 narrative analysis (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). Here, I align with Hall and White's
39 (2005) critique, placing coding analysis closer to an empiricist approach which tends to
40 deviate the researchers' focus from the complexity of social life and from more dense
41 interactional rapports.

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¹ All the interviews were collected in places indicated by the subjects: eight were conducted in their homes, four in secluded spaces in their work places, and only two in public venues.

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3 The narrative analysis conducted in this research relied on reading the interview
4 transcripts as a *story*, as an account where description, language and context of
5 production, structural features of discourse, dialogical aspects and relation with other
6 stories were taken into consideration, as Riessman and Quinney (2005) suggested (in
7 turn, based on Elliot Mishler). My approach was also influenced by Frank's (2012)
8 dialogue narrative analysis. Both Riessman and Frank take the stories produced by
9 informants as plain objects of narrative analysis where the search for 'disruptive life
10 events [and] accounts of 'personal troubles'' (Riessman, 2001b: 55) as well as
11 'complicating events' (and resolutions) (Frank, 2012: 42) become key. These disruptions
12 very much resemble the already mentioned biographic crisis or ruptures present in life
13 stories (Caetano, 2015; Lahire, 2008). Though drawing on Frank's (2012) dialogue
14 narrative analysis, which suggests a somewhat less tightly systematized scheme, my
15 analysis, in certain points, evidenced Labovian key-moments in the subjects' account,
16 especially resolutions (Hyvärinen, 2008; Shaw and Holland, 2014).

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32 As Riessman and Quinney (2005) note, writing articles whose results depend on dense
33 qualitative information, often manifested through long thick narratives, is always a
34 challenging task. When writing this article, that difficulty came up. Given the impracticality
35 of presenting a thorough narrative analysis, three examples from the set of 14
36 interviewees will be used. In each case, moments of critical reflection and discourse on
37 identity will be signalled, analysed and illustrated with excerpts taken from the
38 transcripts.

39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 **From narrative to critical reflection and identity (re)framing – exploring three** 48 **examples**

49 50 51 52 *Example one*

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55 The first example refers to a female interviewee, born in 1948 into a Lisbon's urban high
56 bourgeois family, closely aligned with conservative right-wing values and supportive of
57 the dictatorial establishment. When the interview took place, she was retired from an
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3 University academic position. The interview was recorded in a single session that lasted
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5 1hr and 45 min. Right in the beginning of the interview, in reaction to the first topic
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7 concerning her initial academic trajectory, she addressed the path that took her to social
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9 work:

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11 [When enrolling in higher education] I applied, in that first year, to two places: philosophy
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13 and social work. Between becoming a philosophy teacher or changing the world, which
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15 was something we believed could be done through social work, I chose changing the
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17 world. Where did my politicisation come from?
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20 The issue of the political dimension of the profession was highlighted, almost
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22 immediately, without being directly asked about it – note the question posed by the
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24 subject, suggesting a possible direction of the story into a foreseeable self-reflective
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26 account. A sense of naiveté transpires when remembering past options: it was
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28 ‘something we believed’ expresses, with candour, both the ingenuity and the idealism
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30 which commanded her decisions when she was younger. Note, also, the change from a
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32 first person to a collective voice when referring to idealistic views of the world. This sense
33
34 of naiveté will appear again in the account and it will be important to understand the
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36 subjects’ future options, biographic ruptures and professional (dis)identification, as we
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38 will be able to see later. That question marks an earlier point of reflection in this
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40 interviewee’s life story and sets, from the start, the significance of identity in her account,
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42 especially regarding politically-related choices and political affiliation. One might argue
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44 that when she asks ‘Where did my politicisation come from?’, she is asking for something
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46 more than a *where did it come from*, she is inquiring *how did I become such*, as if the
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48 question implied an early allusion to personal identity and political self-identification.
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52 Personal actions and life choices take on meaning when analysed in the framework of
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54 the subject’s life trajectory, her contextual social milieu and her family relations. An
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56 evidence of such appeared in the first quarter of the interview:
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3 In my last [social work] internship, in a horrific shantytown, it was raining heavily and the
4 priest allowed people to seek refuge inside the church. Then, I had the brilliant idea, with
5 other two fellow colleagues, of making an exhibition outside of that rich church in that affluent
6 neighbourhood: we held a photography display taken by the [poor] people – ahh...
7 participation! In less than 24 hours, the PIDE [political police] went there. The priest was
8 taken in for interrogation and the senior social worker considered terminating our internship
9 because we didn't comply with professional deontology, though later she ended up
10 defending us before the School's board. We were so naïve.
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19 References to the inherent political mandate of the social work profession pervade this
20 interviewee's account. When referring to the interactions she had established with her
21 professional peers or publics, this subject, who graduated in social work in 1970,
22 produced a narrative punctuated by critical reflections which reinforce her claims
23 regarding what she considered social work should be about. As the interviewee, herself,
24 set a dialogical dynamic with the researcher, those critical reflections around her days
25 as social work student emerged in the midst of the conversation:
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34 This is to show you that the profession and its politicisation or the issue of justice and
35 inequality, they've always been tied to professional practice. However, we weren't
36 conscious of that political dimension. By that time we were kind of silly, we had no idea.
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40 The narrative becomes reflexive, exposing a paradoxical or divergent rapport between
41 social condition and professional and life options. As the account develops, it shows the
42 trajectory of a bourgeois social work student who defies traditional professional canons,
43 seeking a commitment with the downtrodden through forms of intervention outside of
44 conservative assistance charity, defying, also, her own patriarchal authority and
45 relinquishing social *status quo* and financial security. For her, working as social worker
46 in Portugal, then, was as an unlikely possibility:
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55 There was a problem: in the meantime, I became a single mother... [silence]. Before the
56 25th April [1974] how could a single mother get a job as a social worker, when social
57 workers were there to show people models of virtue?
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3 Her option of leaving Portugal to study abroad, in 1970, can be read as another step
4 towards the construction of her political self and disaffiliation from conservatism (social,
5 professional, educational, familial):
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10 Back then [late 1960s], I didn't separate the political from the professional. How did I
11 acquire it [political conscience]? Because my education [social work degree] had been
12 very flimsy. What interested me most was sociology and I ended up in Paris [1970] in the
13 aftermath of May 68, where all the [Portuguese] refugees were, amongst some of the
14 best professors of the time, Alain Touraine, Castells. [In 1971] I decided to move to the
15 United States. The UCLA was highly politicised then. Angela Davis was there, the black
16 power guys also. That was very violent.
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23 The story easily turns into a biographic account of how political identity and action took
24 form. Already graduated as a social worker, facing the enduring social and professional
25 conservatism and unable to foresee changes in the short run, she sought other places
26 to carry on her life and apprenticeship. Paris and Los Angeles, as elected destinations,
27 represented sites of liberty, free thinking, vibrant intellectual discussion, academic
28 advancement and venues of revolutionary action and thought. Living abroad for nearly
29 four years was important to develop political conscience, critical thinking and to establish
30 contact with political activists. When she returned to Portugal, before the 1974
31 Revolution, she joined the Revolutionary Brigades (RB), a subversive political
32 organisation known for carrying out armed actions against the dictatorial establishment.
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45 Joining the RBs meant taking another step, a more radical one, towards change:
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48 In Paris, the arguments we had were very intellectualoid. It was café talk, a bit dilettante.
49 When I returned to Portugal, I got involved in the [Revolutionary] Brigades, until 74. I was
50 there for about a year. We held political meetings to discuss how to get rid of the situation
51 [dictatorship] and start throwing bombs to make a Revolution. There it is: we wanted to
52 be more radical than the Communist Party brigades. My adhesion [to the RBs] was
53 political, meaning that 'It must end! It's not possible to continue living in this ignorance.
54 This dark night must end. People must regain their freedom. We must retake democracy'.
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3 Integrating the RBs forced the subject to go into hiding and it was under that condition
4 that she saw the 25th April Revolution happen. Realising that the Revolution was indeed
5 laying the ground for democracy, she disaffiliated from the RBs:
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10 I can tell you that I didn't kill anyone, neither went shooting around, but that part I don't
11 want to talk about. Anyhow, after the 25th April, the RBs went nuts. I understood perfectly
12 that the Revolution was a rupture with fascism and an attempt to implement a democratic
13 society. There was no need to keep pursuing that radical way. I became more
14 conservative in defence of democracy according to European standards.
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20 The above mentioned passage showcases how reflexivity looms in the narrative, as the
21 subject interprets her life experience. What sounded like a firm progression along a
22 radical path is reframed as the subject assumes her ideological repositioning in the
23 context of socio-political changes. The passage shows identity forming and reframing
24 under changing circumstances and how it develops in the story: the rebellious naïve
25 youth, the radical activist, the not so radical idealist.
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33 The 1974 Revolution brings the subject back to the social work profession and to one of
34 the forefronts of the revolutionary process, the SAAL programme. The SAAL (Local
35 Ambulatory Backup Service) was an innovative housing programme led by the national
36 Housing Development Fund, active between July 1974 and October 1976. Among its
37 objectives was the implementation of unconventional solutions regarding housing
38 construction and rehabilitation, relying on participatory processes and wide involvement
39 of local collective structures (Andrade, 1992). Part of the programme implied setting
40 community organisation strategies to which social workers gave a major contribution
41 (Silva, 2018, 2019a). Referring to this period, the subject's narrative reveals the
42 presence of decisions that do not coincide and, in certain moments, collide with dominant
43 social work professional identity discourses:
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56 As people were about to be evicted I went immediately to that neighbourhood and said:
57 'What if we organise an association and start a self-organised construction process?'.
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3 Afterwards, I worked in the creation of social facilities: we've created a kindergarten, a
4 sports group, those things a community social worker does. My colleagues said:
5 'Everybody must do intake and casework. And I replied: 'Yes, indeed. If everyone does
6 community intervention'. So, my stand was: 'While everybody isn't doing community
7 intervention, I won't do casework'. Community work meant working beyond normal work
8 hours and on weekends, while staying put, waiting for people to come over, was more
9 comfortable.
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17 After 1976, as she perceived that her ideal of professional practice (which was, in her
18 own words, promoting change and making communities grow) no longer had the
19 contextual political conditions to be held, she retired from direct practice, and disaffiliated
20 herself, as a professional, from social work.
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26 The narrative shows that the politically driven and community-immersed type of practice
27 was a basic condition of her professional commitment and a key axiological element of
28 her identity as a social worker. The demise of the Revolutionary project, which occurred
29 after 1976, is connected to a moment of life crisis which led to a detachment from the
30 profession. The subject's account identifies points of structural socio-political change,
31 signalling corresponding moments of rupture with the profession:
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39 My greatest accomplishment as a social worker: I've never given a subsidy to the poor.
40 [After] that involvement in the Revolutionary Process, no job would satisfy us. So, I
41 entered [a Public University], and had no regrets about leaving the Social Security,
42 because nothing was done there anymore. It was no longer possible. We were forbidden
43 to speak with the [community] services. That was the complete destruction of our work
44 principles. So, I changed careers.
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51 Rather than justifying parting from the profession as a consequence of a mere personal
52 option, the narrative shows her choice was influenced by the changes that were affecting
53 the profession in terms of service organisation and intervention profiles. Changes which
54 clashed with her ideal professional cut. Her identification as a social worker found no
55 match in the kind of services, practices and institutional design that followed the post-
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3 Revolutionary era – ‘So, I changed careers’ appears as the closing remark, the resolution
4 to the story.
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8 *Example two*
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10 At the beginning of the interview, this social worker, born in 1955 into a working-class
11 family from Lisbon’s industrial periphery, flashed back to her childhood and early school
12 days. At the time of the interview, she held a position in a public library in Lisbon, being
13 in charge of educational and occupational activities. In the initial part of the narrative,
14 collected in a 2hr and 30mn interview, visiting the past meant more than a simple
15 diachronic contextualization of her social and family background. The account, while
16 reminiscing on earlier biographic circumstances and facts in the manner of an internal
17 conversation (Archer, 2003), provides crucial information to the understanding of the
18 subjects’ life options and ruptures as well as her peculiar professional trajectory and
19 (de)identification. It was as if those earliest moments of interview could work as a Rosetta
20 stone, allowing to decode and comprehend the various moments and actions in life:
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34 In my first year at school the teacher called my mother in to say that I might be somewhat
35 retarded. On the second year, I was already a good student, but I didn’t like school. I just
36 wanted to go to work. When I finished the fourth grade, I became a good student, though
37 wishing all the time to drop out of school and get a job. My grades were excellent and I
38 already knew that I wanted to work in something related to the *social*.
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44 Unlike most of the social workers who were interviewed, her narrative does not present
45 clear points of rupture or situations of evident crisis; instead, it frames a continuity in
46 which biographic and professional trajectories (dimensions which cannot be separated)
47 hold an intrinsic coherence and a structured orientation. The following quote offers a
48 perspective of how that continuity is voiced in the narrative:
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55 I was so lucky, because in my first year in the social work degree [1972] I had professors
56 who had been educated in France during the May 68 period. It was at [Lisbon’s Higher]
57 Institute [of Social Work] that I found myself. Back then, the Institute was an oasis in the
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3 desert, filled with very active people. I went [1972-1973] to a few social workers' Union
4 meetings and it was there that I really started to understand the country I was living in.
5
6 My militancy at the [social work] school made me participate in everything, in all the
7 meetings, in all the assemblies. I was involved. My first internship happened in 1974, right
8
9 after the 25th April [Revolution], in Trás-os-Montes [the mountainous rural north-
10 easternmost part of the country]. There, we worked in the fields, which was harsh, and I
11
12 also did adult-education with women. That experience struck me a lot. In my third year,
13
14 my internship was in a neighbourhood in Lisbon, in the SAAL. That was an option.
15
16 Wanting to work in housing was probably influenced by my own childhood experience in
17
18 the [working class] neighbourhoods [in the outskirts of Lisbon]. My radicalism was about
19
20 that: I thought that I would learn from the people and I didn't want to be paid for it.
21
22 Ultimately, I went and lived in that neighbourhood until 1990 [where she developed her
23
24 internship practice in a SAAL project]. My option was to live in the neighbourhood as a
25
26 fully entitled member [of the community].
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30 When points of rupture and crisis seem to occur in the narrative, they do not present as
31
32 situations of deadlock in which the subject finds herself facing hard-to-solve dilemmas.
33
34 In turn, those situations are depicted in the narrative as natural life stages when the
35
36 subject takes somewhat likely decisions, confirming and reaffirming the subject's will in
37
38 obedience to a well determined ethical and political canon. This is representative of the
39
40 narration's reflexive feature. The narrator moves beyond simply describing her actions
41
42 and informing her decisions, revealing mutual causal relations between structural
43
44 circumstances and her own actions.
45
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48 As referred earlier in this article, in social work, biographic narratives collected through
49
50 oral history allow researchers to access the making of alternative professional projects,
51
52 leading, necessarily, to grasp identity related issues. In this case, the narrative provides
53
54 clues that become useful to understand the radical construction of this subject's
55
56 refractory professional identity:
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3 [When working in a SAAL project] I used my social work education, which I have never
4 renounced. There, I did adult education work [using the Paulo Freire method] and
5 participated in the managing and dynamisation of the residents' commissions and
6 associations. My life experience led me to not wanting to become a social work
7 professional. I didn't want to be a social work technician. I wanted to use the education
8 and the knowledge provided by social work to be a person.
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15 The subject's identification as a social worker is never at stake throughout her discourse;
16 yet, she refuses to abide by or affiliate with mainstream social work. Rather than
17 assuming an institutional position as a front-line practitioner or becoming a bureaucratic
18 professional, she manifests a recurrent preference to work in adult education processes
19 and in close articulation with grassroots movements. As the narration continues, frequent
20 critical reflections situating herself in relation to mainstream professional profiles appear.
21 These critical reflections are often enfolded in identity statements, where the professional
22 'I' is hardly separated from the personal *self*.
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32 And there's always that issue about the professional model and professional profile and
33 today I still think about it in these terms: it is so hard being a human being, that I no longer
34 worry about being a professional.
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39 Across her narrative, decision making constantly points in the opposite direction to what
40 one would expect: the good elementary school student who favoured switching from
41 education to work; the high-achieving high school student, qualified to be enrolled in a
42 financially more rewarding degree, but who preferred to study social work instead; a
43 politically active social work student, with a good academic performance, who chose to
44 take a diverging professional path, resisting to incorporate a collective identity that was
45 being forged around the values of professionalism. It is worth noting that, in the late
46 1990s, when applying to a public job, she refused being hired as a Social Work Higher
47 Technician. Then, the designation of the social work career in public services (Branco,
48 2009) which evokes a professional identity related to positivist, rational and scientific-
49 bureaucratic principles (Amaro, 2015). The interviewee's final statement, which can be
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3 read as a form of resolution to the story, renders the refusal of professionalism
4 particularly evident:
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8 Never wanted, never was [a social work professional]. I've always thought that there was
9 a place for a less standardized model of intervention, in line with Latin-American social
10 work. [When] I walked away [from the profession], I told myself: 'No, I don't want to be a
11 social work professional'. Though, deep down, I ended up being that. And I'm perfectly
12 aware of the contradiction.
13
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17 *Example three*

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20 This example is taken from the statements (recorded in two sessions) provided by the
21 youngest of the interviewees, born in 1955 into an urban middle-class family from Lisbon.
22
23 At the time of the interview, she was a social worker in a Social Security branch. Having
24 entered Lisbon's Higher Institute of Social Work in September 1974, she soon caught up
25 with the revolutionary flow and, following the radical changes introduced in social work's
26 academic curricula and internship practice, she developed field observation assignments
27 in rural cooperative movements, becoming a full member of one of the flagship initiatives
28 of the revolutionary times, the Torre Bela agrarian cooperative. This cooperative,
29 situated only 70 kms away from Lisbon, was founded in April 1975 by a grassroots
30 movement which occupied the hunting estate of an aristocratic family (Silva, 2019a).
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42 The subject's narrative reports the frenzy of the revolutionary period and how it affected
43 her perception of the profession and the inner crises she endured, especially those
44 related to the ambiguities around professional representations. The next passage is
45 expressive of such and the note on reconciliation can be read as an example of emerging
46 reflexivity:
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53 When I was doing my internship [1975], social work in institutional settings was highly
54 questioned. The intervention done in the institutions was discredited and there was this
55 hyper-valorisation of social movements and grassroots organisations; there was an
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3 alliance and an immersion in those movements without which social work was
4
5 inconceivable, to the point of... it took me a lot to reconcile to social work.
6

7
8 The social work internship in the Cooperative during the revolutionary process did not
9
10 promote a strong professional identity, on the contrary. As the narrative unfolds, in a
11
12 reflective manner through a sequence of internal dialogues, all those identity issues and
13
14 crisis, it also entails the subject's own interpretation of the causal relations between
15
16 revolutionary immersion and professional disaffiliation:
17

18
19 The immersion [in the Torre Bela cooperative] was so intense that we almost forgot we
20
21 were doing an internship. For a long time, I thought that it wasn't possible to exercise the
22
23 profession from the outside [of grassroots movements]. So, in order to be the an ally of
24
25 change, I needed to be inside. I had to partake from the inside. I had to live within. And
26
27 that was a hard-to-solve inner conflict. I asked myself: how can I be a social worker while
28
29 participating in a movement such as this, participating in processes of change from the
30
31 base? Because the legitimacy of the intervention comes from the 'I, being part of', 'I, being
32
33 there', 'I, being an ally'. If the movement doesn't take me as a social worker, what am I?
34

35
36 The internal dialogues produced during narrations are too obvious to go unnoticed in the
37
38 analysis. They evidence the uncertainties, the doubts, the hesitations, instead of sound
39
40 convictions and solid beliefs. Thus, the narrative develops over identity and around the
41
42 qualms and possibilities that might contribute to frame it – 'For a long time, I thought that
43
44 it wasn't possible'; 'What am I?'.
45

46
47 In 1976, the ending of the revolutionary process nearly made her giving up the social
48
49 work degree:
50

51
52 Back then, [1974-1975], my reflection made me question social work as a profession. I
53
54 finished my degree in 78 and, the first time I was hired as a social worker, it was in 87.
55
56 We questioned the exercise of the profession because, especially I, thought that it had to
57
58 be done through active and militant participation in transformative processes. Besides
59
60 that, I don't know exactly for how long, I reflected over it was worth exercising a profession

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3 aimed at producing social changes without participating in the processes. It was nearly
4
5 questioning the profession itself.
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7 In fact, after 1978, right after graduating, she abandoned the profession (in her own
8
9 expression) and went to work in Mozambique and, later, in the early 1980s, in southern
10
11 Portugal, supporting rural cooperatives and agrarian projects. In the late 1980s, she
12
13 assumed an institutional professional position in the Social Security, the State's general
14
15 welfare service structure. The narrative stressed the biographic discontinuities and the
16
17 seemingly paradoxical situations and life decisions. Returning to statutory social work
18
19 can be read as a crucial rupture in a long developing process of estrangement from the
20
21 profession:
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24
25 I stepped away and it took me years to re-join social work. But, when I returned, I didn't
26
27 do casework. I worked [in a local Health Centre unit] in school health programs. I entered
28
29 the Social Security [in 1988] to occupy a position of Social Work Higher Technician - huh?
30
31 - what to say about this?
32

33 Entering statutory social work influenced her decision to take a master's degree in social
34
35 work and to become a social work teacher and that, in her own words, have proven to
36
37 be two fundamental steps to reconcile herself to the profession. The way the narrative
38
39 exposes the subject's coming back to the profession shows, again, the emerging of
40
41 reflexivity as she re-interprets and re-signifies her past experience. Here, the subject
42
43 does more than simply identifying a moment of reconciliation, she suggests that, firstly,
44
45 reconciling is produced by a rationalisation happening in the very moment the narrative
46
47 is being told and, secondly, that that rationalisation has the effect of validating a life
48
49 trajectory and the choices made in the past:
50

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52 [If] we're talking about rights' enactment, I think that my whole trajectory was one of a
53
54 social worker. I'm thinking about that now... a reconciliation... I'm not sure if that's the
55
56 right term, but reconciling is, somehow, validating all that path, which was not necessarily
57
58 external to social work. I've always understood my job as a [process of] involvement. In
59
60 several moments I've been able to do that sort of professional militancy.

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3 As in the previous example, right at the beginning, this interviewee's narrative provides
4 pieces of information and a reflection that show how her dispositions were constructed
5 and how they influenced the subject's relation with the professional practices that were
6 to become mainstream after the revolutionary period. Carrying out assignments in
7 cooperative projects and becoming a member of one was important to outline her
8 perception of social work in more critical and radical terms and to disengage herself from
9 more traditional, conservative and individualised concepts of professional practice.
10 According to her, countering the constraints imposed by highly regulated institutional
11 professional settings implied a stand of 'professional militancy', which meant being more
12 actively involved with the publics when implementing programs and social measures.
13 Identifying as *professional militant*, readdressed and reaffirmed how she reconciled
14 herself to the profession, offering another example of how biographic interviewing
15 prompts processes of reflexivity and identity formation.
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30 **Ending remarks**

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33 The use of biographic methods associated with oral history and supported by narrative
34 analysis is not just a way of looking back at the past. It also allows researchers to
35 perceive and understand the subjects' identification with the profession over the years
36 until the present-day. Instead of conveying passive reports of individual life trajectories,
37 this biographic approach invites the subjects to actively reflect on their life
38 accomplishments and biographic options, allowing richer reflexive accounts.
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47 The three examples presented in this article reveal how a methodological framework
48 based on oral history, biographic methods and narrative analysis can contribute to
49 induce the reflexive capacities owned by subjects, especially in view of their ability to
50 develop critical reflections on their life trajectories.
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55 The analysis of the narratives showed that, other than simply producing static accounts
56 of past experiences, the use of biographic inquiry allows interviewees to re-capture, re-
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3 interpret and re-signify their own experiences while producing and reframing identity
4 discourses in light of changing socio-political contexts.
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7
8 Identity frameworks come out of oral history and biographic inquiry as people are invited
9 to *evaluate*, as Thompson (2000: 157) puts it, their life trajectories, deeds and
10 interactions. That process was particularly evident in the analysis of the interviewees'
11 narratives. Though not having been directly asked to develop any kind of life balance,
12 the subjects elaborated discourses that generated a critical examination of their
13 attitudes, their decisions and both influenced professional identification.
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20
21 Despite a large body of work on processes of critical reflection and reflexivity in social
22 work, diachronic approaches based on the social and professional memory of social
23 workers, collected through biographic inquiry, are rarer. I hope, with the present article,
24 to have contributed to expand social work's historical critical research, by offering a look
25 into a methodology which merges oral history, the biographic method and narrative
26 analysis.
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