

Natural disasters: narration by rescuers

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Abstract

Postmodern man seems to generate a rift between Freudian instances. The ego seems to have had the upper hand and in everyday life the individual places himself as the only reference point to describe the world. Being part of a community, a family and/or association does not represent a group experience, but rather an attempt to assert its importance in social contexts and reduce loneliness.

The proposed study is an exploratory survey on the representations and perceptions of the experiences of rescuers in a context of natural disaster. The spontaneous reports of a group of volunteers who participated in the operations of support to the population struck by the earthquakes that occurred in L'Aquila, in Emilia Romagna and the most recent one of the Central Italy of 2016 were analyzed. Their story, even after many years, explains their experience of volunteering and the reconstruction of the experience during that field intervention. Each story used in the analysis is structured in written form. Since the story represents an essential experience, an action aimed at organizing one's knowledge and re-elaborating specific themes, it seemed relevant to observe how the volunteers not only had the desire to stop their life in writing but also to share their work publicly, through the online distribution. Since the stories manifest the gnoseological and organizational categories of the individual, aimed at the attribution of meaning and to the reconstruction of sense of some aspects of one's life, it is interesting to understand how the volunteers, who are so committed to keeping the community alive and sharing, describe their experience in a public context. It is essential, therefore, to understand which are the dimensions of meaning within which the volunteers remember that event. It is important to understand the stories that are conveyed around this theme and whether the members of the group have shared not only in action, but also in the construction of meanings, a humanly demanding intervention since narration is an action that expresses a way of structuring the self and to create bonds with others.

Keywords: *narration; earthquake; volunteers; communication; knowledge.*

1. The narration as an experience of synthesis of the ego and the world

The act of narrating allows human beings to build thoughts and to categorize reality. The individual constructs stories that express his being in the world and that guide its evolution. By telling stories he builds his own self and allows others to understand typing patterns and tune in to a common code. The social reality is built on the basis of a dialectical process in which the individual exteriorizes and objectifies the real until it reaches an internalization (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

"All facts are from the beginning selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. We do not grasp reality in its entirety, but we seize, from time to

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time, only certain aspects of it" (Schütz 1974: p.5). Each individual selects on the basis of his experience and his interpretative schemes of the world, only a portion of the real. The person performs, therefore a classification operation, implements an order that is based on its attribution and relevance system. The dimension of meaning of one's own experiences and of the world is a continuous becoming, a dynamic dimension that creates dimensions of valid meanings in the here and now and not always become predictive factors of the future (Stefanazzi 2013). "We turn our interest to those experiences that for one reason or another seem relevant to our total situation as we experience it in each specific present" (Schütz 1974: p. 256).

The change in life happens through the choice of some stories of the Self and the world. It means an ability to construct and reconstruct dimensions of meaning, which through the story give meaning to one's life story and generate experiences. It is a dimension that is both private and public at the same time, a space in which the ego gives its own meaning to reality and builds on it based on it. "Our ability to translate experience into narrative terms is not just a child's play, but rather a tool for creating meaning that dominates much of life in the context of a culture" (Bruner 1992: p. 97). In this way, individuals compete in the construction of individuality and of that culture to which they belong. It is not a question of considering the narrative's linguistic expressions according to literary criteria, but of understanding that the construction and transmission of knowledge passes through the interaction that can be traced in listening and in comparison.

Narrative identity (Ricoeur 1985) reveals itself through a story that in everyday life describes and pre-writes the identifiable human being precisely in the culture that in its becoming creates a meaning that transcends and at the same time legitimizes the individual in its uniqueness. It allows us to insert ourselves with our personal history in the history of humanity "unifying our experience in a story we do not do a job of linguistic expression, but of self-understanding" (Danese 1983: pp. 92-93).

The continuous autobiographical exercise (Cavarero 1997) expresses a narratable self that builds a personal and collective memory, a tendency towards an ideal of the person, a life story that makes the subject unique. The narratable self is the synthesis of the individual's cognitive-emotional-social capacities and summarizes the experiences that the individual has chosen in his life path. It is not about a fantastic representation of an ideal "I", but about the most intimate expression that the individual constructs of his own history. The interaction between people takes place through a narrative process in which the parties choose how much and how to reveal is the second time they use this verb!) "To show yourself" to the other. "The stories structure, organize, order our most everyday and prosaic behaviors" (Demetrio 2012: p. 45). Thought passes is essentially narrative (Bruner 1988), our story is a story and memory is not confined to past experiences, but also becomes expressed in a narrative act.

The mind has a creative capacity that remains active throughout life, knowing how individuals tell their world means, being able to understand their attributions of value and actions. "The relationships that constitute the premise of the process that leads to the sharing of assumptions and beliefs concerning the reality of the world, the functioning of the mind, the orientations of men and the ways in which communication between them, should be expressed" (Bruner 1988: p 71).

Language thus becomes the main instrument through which the subject can identify himself, through introspection and confronts himself with others by making him able to rethink his life story restructuring it on the basis of his evolution and his

interests. This process of continuity and self-recognition represents the "narrative unity" (Connelly and Clandinin 1997, 2000), an aspect that determines a story with its own internal logic, in which the subject recognizes himself by giving meaning and understanding a life in progress. The stories created by individuals become "a flexible linguistic tool to interpret and speak about reality (self and world)" (Smorti 2007: p. 78).

2. Death as a common experience

Death is an experience that belongs to everyday life. Newscasts, newspapers and the media in general educate us daily about the experience of death. A death that is treated either with extreme journalistic neutrality or shared as a sort of obsessive exhibition, we recall the cases of Yara Gambirasio, Chiara Poggi and Meredith Kercher.

The experience of the death of others usually takes place with the disappearance of a single person or in particular cases of a few people. Natural disasters are an exception (disasters such as earthquakes, floods, accidents, epidemics) that bring large numbers of individuals to death. The biographical experience of death and its perception depend on the symbolic universe built around it. Spheres of meaning, in fact, do not remain isolated but are placed in a hierarchy of reality so as to become "intelligible and less terrifying" (Berger and Luckmann 1997: p. 139).

Fear of this dimension of life is contained by strengthening the predominant reality of everyday life that leads to "putting everything in the right place". Regardless of what all the legitimacies of death are, they must carry out the task of allowing the individual "to continue to live in society after the death of people important to him and to foresee his own death with a terror mitigated enough to allow him to continue to follow the normal routines" (Berger and Luckmann 1997: p. 141).

Legitimation provides the individual with the recipe for a correct death since it has the fundamental function of alleviating fear and protecting against terror. The meaning of these universes is individual and social and provides protection both on the social order and on the individual biography. This creates a memory shared by all those who have been socialized in the community, a memory that "projects" individual actions into the future, helping to transcend the limitations of human existence and to give meaning to death.

Even individual memories, like those handed down by history, have a form that "does much more than simply represent collective memory in each specific context" (Wagner-Pacifici 1996; p. 302; Tota 2004: p. 76). By "individual memories" we mean those who experienced a catastrophic event not as a victim but as a "rescuer".

Experiencing an event like an earthquake as a television viewer or as a newspaper reader is very different from being personally involved as a rescuer. It also seems important to consider mobilization by asking what can lead to collective action that may arise for various reasons.

In contemporary culture the concept of death seems to be closely linked to an external factor. One does not die any more, is killed by something, and the focus directs the attention to the individual, to the causes, and the analysis allows to separate the emotional component from the cognitive one. There is a lack of habit at the thought of death as the loss of a person, of his specificity, at the time of death the individual is stripped of his history and the cause becomes the true protagonist of the narration (Bauman 1992). In post-modernity the great narratives that historically have comforted humanity (Elias 1992) become uncertain anchors. The tendency to concentrate all the

attention on the individual and on his self-neutrality and secularization have led society to review its interpretative schemes not only of the world, but also of the Other as a support and sharing system.

3. The research

The proposed research is placed as an exploratory investigation into the world of volunteering, in particular on how the volunteers reconstruct their association commitment after an intervention in maximum emergency. The analysis focuses on the narrative repertoires of some volunteers who intervened following the earthquake in L'Aquila in 2009 in which there were 309 victims and that of Amatrice in 2016 with 292 deaths.

The analysis of the text, as already mentioned, makes it possible to understand the dimensions of meaning of the individual subjects and to observe the cultural matrix that is built by the group. This is an analysis that reconstructs the communicative exchange between human beings who spontaneously decide to join in order to reach a common goal.

Building bonds and relationships becomes the watchword and the strategy to promote virtuous behaviors aimed at perceiving oneself as protagonists. In this way a resilient interaction model is created which is able to flexibly modify its argumentative and evaluative boundaries. The narrative reports produced by the volunteers allow you to map the negotiation points chosen by the individual so as not to get lost in solipsism and keep the natural propensity to sociality alive. This is an evolutionary path, which in the contemporary context certainly becomes more flexible, but which in this way keeps alive the political commitment and solidarity of the citizen (Beck 2000).

3.1. Methodology and sample

A number of 50 texts produced by volunteers who had interventions in the earthquake areas, were analyzed with the Spad-T software. The Spad-T is a software that allows performing qualitative and quantitative analysis on the text.

The reports on the experience are distributed as follows: 31 produced by volunteers who intervened after the quakes in L'Aquila in 2009 and 19 by volunteers who worked following the Amatrice earthquake in 2016. Most of the texts come from the web. These are stories that volunteers spontaneously shared in spaces such as blogs, interviews and associative reports. Some texts have been sent by volunteers who, after learning about the research, have decided to participate by sending the text by e-mail. The web demonstrates, also in this case, to be a new public space, an agora in which the subjects socialize and share experiences. In a globalized society, identity is built up through a relationship of knowing: being, doing, knowing that it is conveyed by IT devices. It should be remembered, however, that the use of computer systems represents a comfort zone for the interlocutors, the listener remains in his anonymity keeping this experience private and the narrator shields himself through distance and the indirect dimension of the relationship. It represents a communication that requires minimal effort and offers the possibility of doing many activities simultaneously making the relationship superficial, while the use of communication in the presence has different possibilities, but also disadvantages not calculated (Bauman 2013).

Reading this typology of texts allows us to understand how the processing of experience in an "extraordinary" context, as it does not involve the daily experience of the individual, is entrusted to a sort of no man's land, a space in which the connection

with other people are simple and easily accessible. In direct interpersonal relationships this dynamic becomes more complex.

The space for re-elaboration is no longer contained in the direct encounter with group-mates and friends and family, but it needs an externalization, a public context that allows to get out of one's solitude and a further argument on the subject. Therefore, an experience is entrusted to the web that in everyday life assumes value only in the relationship of the here and now. On the web, one's experience can feed itself over time and for this to happen it must only be noticed. The fragility of this type of relationship consists in fact in the situation that it is enough to ignore the writing of the other to interrupt the relationship (Bauman 2013). "In a world in fragments like ours it is precisely to these fragments that we must pay attention" (Geertz 1999: p. 17). In these "non-places" (Augè 2002) there is a sort of re-signification of the world, of complex experiences that are defined in a non-traditional relational space. These are narratives that take place at a time when we tend to progressively eliminate "the protective framework of the small community and traditions, replacing them with larger and impersonal organizations. The individual feels alone and lost in a world in which psychological supports are lacking, that is, lacking the security present in more traditional environments" (Giddens 1999: p. 43). The construction of a pastiche personality (Gergen 1991) of a chameleonic "I" that builds up fragments of life selected from relationships and contexts to which the subject tends to adapt plastically also passes through the digital in order to find its own space and its dimension of meaning.

3.2. The results

The entire text was analyzed only after having incorporated the terms that take on meaning in their union as for example "cross", "red" becomes a single lexeme "red cross". The emerged dictionary puts among the most frequent words terms related to the aspects characterizing the same theme, words like "volunteers, people, field, ..." (tab 1.) represent how the text is oriented mainly to a definition of the borders of the identity of the volunteer. Without these specific aspects, the volunteer would remain an inactive figure, a dimension that exists only potentially. Although these dimensions seem to be taken for granted and in any case present in texts of this nature, it is clear that they delimit the territory within which the volunteer stands out from the crowd, he becomes the rescuer who directly touches the question, the one who is operating in the field and this factor allows the individual to emerge from the social group to which he belongs. This "emergence,, is very important because "the disqualification is also taking place in the social sphere: to the extent that material inequality isolates people, fixed-term work makes their social contacts more superficial and culture triggers anxiety for 'Other, the skills needed to manage irreducible differences are being lost. We are losing the technical skills of collaboration, necessary for the proper functioning of a complex society" (Sennett 2014: p. 19). In this climate the volunteer becomes the one who not only finds meaning in his own being in the world with his work, but who, with his actions, contributes to creating a relational and community space. In the contemporary context, becoming a volunteer and being recognized as such is structured on the basis of a self-perception of being engaged "in" and by the ability to create specific social ties (Prandini 2014), the intervention in particular contexts allows to feed a gnoseological system that legitimizes the action of the individual and confers social dignity. The story remains adherent to the essential elements that allow the interlocutor to uniquely identify the reference context and seems to be a part that strengthens the value of the

text and its author. A path of self-definition is highlighted which necessarily passes through a role and a space rather than through an action that is often implied.

Tab. 1. List of words by counts order

Used words		Counts
volontari	volunteers	73
persone	people	73
campo	field	55
prima	before	54
terremoto	earthquake	53
giorni	days	53
protezione_civile	civil protection	45
vita	life	45
casa	home	45
occhi	eyes	42
ore	hours	40
notte	night	38

To better understand the meaning of these fragments of life, the recurring phrases used by the authors to describe their experience were subsequently analyzed. It has been noted that most of the recurring phrases are purely technical in nature, for example "the mobile column of..." ("la colonna mobile di..."), however it emerges that the expression "give a hand" ("dare una mano") (freq. 11). The concept of helping seems to express that one of the motivating factors that induced individuals to take part in the mission is precisely the will to be useful. Using the phrase "lend/give a hand" underlies a concept of humility and solidarity, the subjects do not speak of help or to fix a situation compromised by the earthquake, but simply to do what is expected from a community: to help each other. Furthermore, it can be emphasized that "helping out" is a metaphor that implies corporeality, therefore being in first person in contact with others and with things. "The common good is the social bond that unites people, and on which both material and immaterial goods depend. The human person cannot find fulfillment in himself, since his achievement is "with" the others and "for" the others. This principle requires not only that the human person lives with others at various levels of social life, but also and above all that he constantly seeks good in daily practice, and not only with reference to the general ideas in the existing forms of social life. [...] The common good is a constitutive element of its own importance and the real reason for their existence" (Donati 2011: p. 77). For some, the common good becomes an empathic way to affirm one's individuality, the opportunity that allows the individual to free himself from a situation of pressing ordinariness. A practice that creates added

value, a cooperation that allows the individual to create relationships of trust towards common living.

Subsequently, by means of the Vospec procedure, an attempt was made to understand what differed the stories of the Volunteers¹ who intervened in the two reference territories. From the emerged data we note that the volunteers who intervened in the rescue mission to Amatrice seem to be more oriented towards the operative dimension. We find terms such as "digging, emergency, situation, fire brigade".

Tab. 2 Specific language. Case: Amatrice 2016

Characteristic words or segments	Internal percentage	Global percentage	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Test-Value	Probability
scavare	0,10	0,06	13	24	2,726	0,003
adesso	0,07	0,04	9	9	2,577	0,005
soci	0,07	0,04	9	9	2,577	0,005
centro Italia	0,07	0,04	9	9	2,576	0,005
emergenza	0,15	0,11	21	26	2,478	0,007
sul posto	0,12	0,08	16	19	2,379	0,009
forze	0,06	0,03	8	8	2,366	0,009
le prime	0,06	0,03	8	8	2,366	0,009
la situazione	0,07	0,04	10	11	2,167	0,015
vigili del fuoco	0,07	0,04	10	11	2,167	0,015

The interpersonal relationships and the relations between rescuers and rescued that have represented in the past a strategic point of the same organization of Civil Protection seem to be put into the background. In the past it was not uncommon to hear that the rescuer perceived himself as a "Bertolaso man". The phrase "my men ..." was often proposed by the media. In this way not only the bonds between the operators were strengthened, but also the desire to be part of that same team of which he spoke so much. A public and constant recognition has allowed individuals to focus their attention even on dimensions that were not exclusively operational. In this new context, the recognition of a charismatic leader who can create not only a team of operators but also a concept of community seems to be missing. The operational dimension thus becomes the aspect on which to focus in order to feel part of a group that cooperates to reach a common goal.

In the group of volunteers who intervened in 2009, the word "service" appears as well as a clear reference to emotional dimensions, "affection" is a significant dimension for this group. The reference to a more associative and community dimension that also passes through relationships of affection and friendship seems to be of greater relevance for the volunteers who intervened in the mission in Abruzzo. Sharing and collaboration become a value for this group of volunteers that cannot be ignored. As Sennett (2008) recalls, cooperating is the future, it is the only way in which individuals can regain their sociality and get out of the loneliness that tends to imprison rather than free post-modern man. In the group that intervened in the 2009 earthquake (Table 3), terms such

¹ Through this procedure, we analyze how specific a term is for that portion of the sample.

as "we, service, affection..." emerge, which refer to a situation of sharing and interpersonal relationship. A propensity to sociability that is supported by a free choice to sacrifice part of Self for others. A vocation or in the sense of Beruf (Weber 1904), guarantees life to the community and to those who work directly in the field. It is a voluntary service that creates a network of relationships, relationships that sustain not only the injured party but also those who intervene to support the population. The volunteer does not bind himself to a single cause, but in a more pragmatic way he strives until he is satisfied. A structured relationship to satisfy one's own need for well-being (Prandini 2014). However, only the relationship with the Other allows the survival of the individual, the collective dimension shifts the boundary of solitude and precariousness, entrusting to the Other the possibility of being recognized as individuals. The group and the action of Volunteering in the group re-confers on the post-modern individual his humanity and brings him back to a sociality characterized by being part of and not being only an "I".

Tab. 3 Specific language. Case: Aquila 2009

Characteristic words or segments	Internal percentage	Global percentage	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Test-Value	Probability
noi	0,43	0,26	47	65	4,412	0,000
abruzzo	0,09	0,04	10	10	3,428	0,000
servizio	0,08	0,04	9	10	2,643	0,004
vita	0,26	0,18	29	45	2,539	0,006
affetto	0,05	0,02	6	6	2,420	0,008
della vita	0,05	0,02	6	6	2,419	0,008
città	0,13	0,08	14	19	2,337	0,010
campo	0,31	0,23	34	56	2,302	0,011

Finally we performed the analysis of lexical correspondences, in order to understand the transversal dimensions present in the text. "Knowing something that is other than oneself means understanding that it is only possible to go towards what we would like to seize the secrets, in the awareness of having to respect the mystery of being" other than oneself "and the mystery that is contained in it. We never have the knowledge of the other self in its absoluteness, in its objectivity, in its total understanding, in its unconditional diaphanousness. We are only given a reliable interpretation of the text (hermeneutic method), and never a deciphering or explanation of the simple text, remaining open to what the "other wants to tell us and how it wants to reveal itself" (Romano 2004; p . 39).

Analyzing the graph (graph 1) we can define that the factor "1" summarizes the experiential cycle of the volunteer that intervenes in a maximum urgency context and that it is therefore possible to define the identity of the volunteer in action. Without those elements, the volunteer himself tends to perceive and perceive the Other, as a person who has not fully experienced the service experience. Solidarity becomes our destiny (Bauman 2003) although we live in a world built to make cooperation and solidarity a choice that is not only unpopular, but also difficult and burdensome, man has no choice, the interdependence of the subjects creates the basis for a relationship of mutual solidarity to be consolidated (Bauman 2003). A relationship that guarantees not

It is interesting to observe how over time the perception of an intervention has changed and how the story of the volunteers has progressively, perhaps because of the time elapsed which modifies the immediacy of emotions and therefore also of the story, lost adherence to the emotional dimensions. The relational, complicity and cooperation dimension is increasingly becoming an indispensable operational expression. This factor seems to be a further proof of the loneliness of post-modern man who, even in an associationist context oriented towards solidarity and community protection, seems to have lost confidence in the Other and the possibility that his social capital may be a way out of solipsism.

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