Abstract

Third age has become a relevant and complex problem for Western societies, requiring innovative approaches and tools. It concerns such the medical and economic fields, as the cultural, familial and the anthropological ones. This paper aims at exploring the possible contributions of a pedagogical action expressly focused on the mnestic system of the older persons, on their representation of the time and on Mental Time Travel (Suddendorf & Corballis, 1997). The possibilities offered by the in-depth analysis about the inter-functionality of memory, emotions and by the stimulation of neuronal plasticity through music, will be highlighted. This perspective, which might appear as mainly neuroscientific, would be, instead, an ideal framework for those strategies, which promote a pedagogy of memory and the narrative re-elaboration of the Self for older persons. Lastly, Musical Autobiography (Strollo, 2014), which is an educational device crossing through said different research fields, introduces itself as an efficient tool in producing empowerment and transforming, at the same time, the relationship between the older persons and society.

Keywords: Pedagogy of memory; emotions; music; musical autobiography; neural plasticity; mental time travel.

1 A PEDAGOGY FOR OLDER PERSONS

The most typical trait of the current historical moment in Western countries is given by the conflict between a radical democracy aimed at the development of the human person, and a neoliberal and post-democratic drift. The latter, in the name of production, profit and competitiveness brings back the standard of living, both from the social and economic perspectives, at the dawn of the 20th century. In this context, for a democracy that still wants to exist, the pedagogical action represents one of the possibilities to enable the full participation of citizens in the community life (Dewey, 1916).

In fact, encouraging one person’s development, becomes a powerful antidote to all those poisons such as racism, retribalisation, knowledge fragmentation, which are typical of a globalized post-modernity. Said phenomena request a new balancing of the differences by placing the inclusion of diversity as a central theme of contemporary pedagogy.

2 ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE MNESTIC PROCESSES

Memory directly involves the constitution of the self and the identity of the person, placing itself as an essential structure for pedagogical reflection. In this paper, where the educational prospects of the elderly persons are considered, it becomes necessary to deepen the topic.

As Demetrio (1995) writes, the act of remembering «not only carries out a prolonged pedagogical function, which we realize only by reflecting about it [but], it also represents an invitation to nurture a pedagogy of memory [...] to trace the sacredness [of] experiences».

However, what we will first highlight is how little is known about the overall architecture and the dynamics of memory so that there are opposite interpretations of its functionality, of which the reminiscent mode and the reconstructive one are emphasized from time to time.

Demetrio, who is closer to re-evocative positions, mentions that «scientific and philosophical research has spoken of structures or systems that support our psychological framework. The progressive sedimentation of our life experiences, of which we cannot always remember everything, builds what we...»

1 The paper has been written by all the three Authors. However, the Author of the paragraphs 1 is Vittoria P., the Author of the paragraph 2 is Del Mastro M.C., the Author of the paragraph 3 is De Simone M.
are. Despite forgetting many of them, those experiences deposited in immense oblivion basins support and feed us day by day, even if we’re not aware them (Demetrio, 1995).

Also Proust conforms himself to the re-evocative mode as we can deduce from the prose of the recherche: «In place of the abstract expressions “the time when I was happy,” “the time when I was loved,” which he had often used until then, and without much suffering, for his intelligence had not embodied in them anything of the past save fictitious extracts which preserved none of the reality, he now recovered everything that had fixed unalterably the peculiar, volatile essence of that lost happiness; he could see it all; the snowy, curled petals of the chrysanthemum which she had tossed after him into his carriage, which he had kept pressed to his lips, the address ‘Maison Dorée,’ embossed on the note-paper on which he had read “My hand trembles so as I write to you,” the frowning contraction of her eyebrows when she said pleadingly: “You won’t let it be very long before you send for me?”; he could smell the heated iron of the barber whom he used to have in to singe his hair while Loredan went to fetch the little working girl…» (Proust, 1913).

The Author’s extraordinary ability to penetrate strategies of memory, describes paths that fork: on the one hand there are abstract, explicit, declarative memories; they are de-limited by language and weak in emotional evocation. On the other hand, there are memories that unexpectedly and with force re-emerge, filled with sensory and emotional details ready to overwhelm the subject.

Walking through a specific memory “path” seems to be the result of an unintentional process: a fortuitous and triggering occurrence (e.g. when Swann were listening to the music) would catalyse the emergence of non-ordinary bright memories. Said process, would imply the permanence of such memories in perfectly sealed mental recesses that are ready, anyway, to re-open once the correct “abracadabra” has been pronounced.

It is a point of view that considers any single memory as sufficiently stable, whose biggest change is transforming its state from being conscious to unconscious and vice versa. This dynamic may seem close to psychoanalysis from which, instead, it takes distance. When Freud in 1897 dwelt on the meaning of memories of presupposed traumas and sexual violence dating back to the patient’s childhood, he believed that these memories that emerged under hypnosis or during the analysis, were truthful and that they had to be trusted. However, later on he judged that it was a matter of fantastic confabulations and that the memories of the -supposed- sexual abuses dating back to childhood, actually were “screen memories”, distortions or projections which, through “invented” visual images depicted unconscious desires or conflicts of the patient» (Oliverio, 2013).

Two centuries earlier, although from a non-overlapping perspective, the philosopher Locke thought about the need for a voluntary act of remembrance in order to preserve the memories: «our spirit resembles those tombs where inscriptions are erased by time and images fall in powder, even if bronze and marble remain. […] The pictures drawn in our minds are laid down in fading colors, and if they aren’t sometimes refreshed, they vanish and disappear» (Locke, 1690).

“Refreshed” means re-experienced, relived: here, there is not the idea of something that re-emerges after a long wait, but of a sort of mnestic residue that wears new clothes once it makes a new contact with life. The differences between these positions may appear harmless, but they draw the map of an insidious territory, where it is easy to get lost. Common sense considers memory in a static way, as if it were a brick lying on the edge of oblivion and that we can imagine as a constructive element of the complex building of identity.

We can even come to believe that we are our memories! Moreover, if we look in detail at any of these memories, we will see how they blur in front of our eyes because of their reduced number of sensory attributes. It is enough to recall the face of a loved one to see how few details we are able to precisely focus on, and, in any case, this effort ends up being a reconstructive questioning/self-narration, rather than an evocative action. A construct recently emerged as an evolution of the episodic memory (Tulving, 1972) is the Mental Time Travel (Suddendorf & Corballis, 1997) that can be considered as a functionality of the mind that dynamizes the memory, highlighting its reconstructive and simulative nature. That probably fits with the acquisition of neuronal plasticity (Kandell, 2000). In fact, it looks like MTT would consider the whole mnestic action as the emergence of a transformation, of a permanent mental oscillation. However, this way the MTT, compares mnestic and imaginative function questioning if it might be a single or a double modality of the mind, with quite different characteristics. Furthermore, it is clear the necessity of «a recognition of the limited utility of a purely storage-and-retrieval conception and the need for a conception which emphasizes remembering as a process in which the agent actively reconstructs the past […] But given that remembering is a generative process which may produce representations containing little information stemming from the original experience of the relevant past
episodes, a more roundabout explanation of its reliability is required [...] The conscious dimension of episodic simulation is necessary to enable remembering agents to discriminate between episodic constructive processes aimed at representing episodes from the personal past and episodic constructive processes aimed at other targets. Absent its conscious dimension, the constructive character of human episodic remembering would render it unreliable and hence maladaptive» (Michaelian, 2016).

What becomes interesting in this theoretical framework, from a pedagogical perspective, is the transition from an idea of memory as a sharp and immutable residue to another one, that sees it as a dynamic entity permanently constructed and re-constructed. This nature of memory lends itself, due to its plasticity, to transformative life-span logics, increasing the chances of success of educational interventions with and for elderly people.

Anyway, if we borrow Freire’s reflections, we will see that the main methodologies, such as lifelong learning, which are used for a pedagogical work for and with the older persons, think of a logic made of “contents”, according to an idea of a knowledge that has to be continuously increased. Those methodologies are starting to show obvious cracks. The enslavement of these strategies to the laws of the market ended up with delivering them to the experts of banking education. Said definition was devised by Freire in other contexts (1970) but we are using it here in order to emphasize the necessity of the critical thinking, even for the education of elderly people. Conversely, the possibility for a person to continuously develop has been turned, because of lifelong learning, into the obligation of a productive relocation. Then, the lack of a genuine pedagogical strategy has ended with increasing people’s frustration and inadequacy (Plussi, 2014).

Thinking again about the methods and goals, is desirable in light of the whole set of experiences and studies gained over the last decades.

The autobiographical devices showed to be of considerable interest in the intervention with the older persons for their practical and immediate effects. In particular, the musical autobiography (Strollo, 2014) integrates many aspects of humanistic pedagogy with neuroscientific perspectives. It also benefits from music, opening towards the territories of emotional memory. It is a privileged device to scaffold identity reconfigurations in old age. We have seen how the vision of a complex mnestic system, made up of relationships rather than things, is emerging through practices and research, and how it constitutes the foundation of a multi-layered and narratively constructed identity. Precisely in this perspective, the musical autobiography favours the elicitation of involuntary memories, thanks to the musical listening. The elicitation sets in motion a dynamic between implicit and explicit memory. The spontaneous re-emergence of these memories produces an emotional impact that has the prerogative to stimulate the plasticity of the pre-existing identities by arranging adaptive reconfigurations. The effect of the emotional response determined by listening to music is to predispose the person to a new reading/reconstruction of one’s own existence plot and sense of authenticity, dissolving the points of fixation, the pre-established ideas, the memes, in the light of a reshuffling of meanings and new perspectives that materialize through the effect of a renewed existential narrative.

3 FINAL REFLECTIONS

The educational approach to old age has to intersect with a pedagogy of memory and with autobiographical methodologies that, by adapting Freire's thought in a new context, aim at a «cultural action for liberation [...] which tends to demystify reality and to prepare man to act in historical praxis, on the basis of which awareness emerges as intentionality and man is not only a container of culture, but, in the dialectical context with reality, he becomes the creator of culture in a process of active, authentic and dynamic knowledge» (Freire, 1969). Through the words of the Brazilian educator it becomes clear that it is no longer possible to think anything in terms of thingness: not even one's own most intimate memories that unfold in a constructive and reconstructive dialectic through language, through one's community with one's own strength, desire and power structures that govern it. Our very identity, as an imbricate memory, does not belong to us. It belongs to the narrations of a language that is ours and, simultaneously, it is not (Derrida, 1996). In reality it belongs to the controllers of the memes, of a knowledge that does not lead to a reflection, making the man slave of commonplaces. A pedagogical action should consist in the disarming of these cultural traps. According to Giroux's thought (2009), it has to reflect of how it can also be a political action, connected to agency. In fact, by illuminating the relationships between knowledge, authority and power, education should focus on issues related to who has control over the production of knowledge, values and abilities, and should show how knowledge, identity and authority are built within particular sets of social relations. Awareness is inextricably linked to the responsibility of the individual and social action, as part of a broader attempt to engage most of
the citizens to the democratic public life. It is interesting to explore the ways to deepen the liberating potential of anti-oppressive pedagogies, concerning the described methodologies for the educational work on memory processes for and with the elderly person. Besides, it would be important to question ourselves about the logic of domain, particularly focusing on the foundational mind/body polarity in the teaching/learning process. We would suggest a holistic theory and practice (De Simone, 2018) in order to expand people’s awareness about the oppressive nature of the polar dimension in thought and, more in general, in their life. Pedagogical praxis can’t remain only at an intellectual level, nor they can’t remain at the cognitive side of knowledge production. In fact, they fail to create the necessary conditions to reach profound transformative levels for life. According to McLaren (1989), a critical pedagogy that promotes changes without involving body, emotions and one’s own and others’ sense of self, is incomplete (Orr, 2002). By following this direction, in order to challenge the mind/body polarity and to promote an integrated development, we would need a holistic pedagogical praxis such as, for example, the musical autobiography that solicits implicit memories closer to the body. In brief, what has to be recognized is that critical education is not about a preconceived methodology that can simply be applied despite the context. It «is the result of particular struggles and it is always related to the specificity of community ties [and] to the available resources» (Giroux, 2009). It is also related to the stories of the people, to their narrations and new narrations that weave complex and changing identities. In this sense, Giroux’s conceptualization of education as a form of provocation and challenge is interesting, «as a practice rooted in an ethical-political vision that attempts to bring people beyond the world they already know in a way that does not make them insist on an unmovable set of altered meanings causing, instead, an expansion of the range of human possibilities» (ibidem). Giroux’s reflections suggest forms of knowledge and pedagogy that allow the “subversive” potential of a democratic culture.

REFERENCES


