

## Melodrama and heroization: The media in biographical accounts

Ana Carolina Escosteguy<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The article discusses the production of identities related to media. The individual voice is understood as a principle to develop culture analyses. This position is based on Nick Couldy. The main purpose is to explore an empirical research that uses biographical interviews with women. The result is composed of identitarian narratives that reveal a specific way of being, which is constituted in the act of the storytelling, and yet is crossed by material and cultural factors, amongst which the media itself; these narratives are built through cultural conventions which circulate within the media; amongst those, we stress the presence of melodramatic characteristics and a process of heroization.

**Keywords:** Media, individual, melodrama, heroization.

The main focus of this article examines the formation of individual identities. To achieve such, it is explored a perspective, built under the scope of communication studies, based on the understanding that there isn't a sole answer for the question of media's transformations regarding social life; such changes cannot be understood as a direct consequence of its action, which implies, therefore, an one way approach. Within this approach, it is chosen as target the social construction of individuals who suffer influence from the media, due to its deep penetration within their social and individual spaces. So this study focuses on individuals via materials collected in the field, obtained through biographical interviews of women who work at cosmetics services. Unlike other reports on this investigation, here, there is an attempt to use a new way of presenting the narratives about identities, in an effort to preserve the dramatic character and strength of these life stories. Throughout this paper, some difficulties encountered are commented on. Beyond methodological discussions, it is apparent that the life

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD in Communication Sciences in the University of São Paulo, Post-doctorate in Camri (Communication and Media Research Institute), associated with the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the School of Media, Art and Design, University of Westminster (UK). Full professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, acting at graduation (Media and Reception, Communication, Culture, Brazilian Reality Guidance Monograph Project) and postgraduate (Communication and Cultural Studies).

stories of these women are structured through narrative conventions present in the media and through a process of constructing the image of a heroin. Without referring directly to the media, these women evoke characteristics of melodramatic narratives, re-signifying them in their little world of ordinary life, which reveals practices related to the media, even though these practices are not associated to media texts or to specific media companies. By doing so, their narratives fabricate the new heroines of today.

### **1. The Starting Point**

The starting point of the present study presupposes the following idea: The media constitutes contemporary society. We live in a world saturated by the media, or, in other words, “by the invasive ubiquity of the media” (Silverstone, 2005: 191). Its presence spreads to all levels of the social process and is part of it. As stated by França (2012: 12), “the media is part of society, is inserted in it, just as health care centers, public defenders’ offices, sports centers, to name a few”. However, the option here is not for the study of the media as structures, as organizations and/or corporations. As it is neither for its study by devices, usually called technologies, nor by the several platforms and their interfaces, institutionalized, that produce and disseminate content, nor by forms and formats, heading for the particularities of languages attributed to each means of communication or even to the convergence among them. In lieu of any of these partial options, the media is understood herein as a sort of institution, composed of all of the above, forming a network that occupies a certain position in the constitution of society through which we access the social world as a whole. Based on this understanding, we intend to study society, specifically, this society constituted *with* the media, *in* the individual.

In other words, the radiation of the media surpasses the social and is connected with the production of subjectivities. This presupposes the recognition and understanding the fluidity with which the media penetrates and affects individuals, thus, according to Bird (2003, p. 93), “in a media-saturated culture, it is no longer possible to separate out the ‘effects’ of particular media (if it ever was). The challenge is to reach a broader and more complex understanding of how individuals are formed and how they

act ‘within’ cultures. Or, as Johnson (1998: 81) claims: “*our* project is to abstract, describe and reconstitute in concrete studies forms through which human beings ‘live’, become conscious, sustain themselves subjectively.”

My interest is to study both social formations and the role of the media in the general ordering of social life, that is, cultural cohesion at the level of a broader structuration, as well as the relation of individuals with social and cultural spaces and how they are subjectively produced by these social relations. However, the present study is an attempt to encompass the latter problematic. This approach highlights the social construction of the individual, a topic that exceeds the limits of my field, that is, communication, given that the pair individual-society is a cardinal topic of sociology, anthropology, among other areas. A trajectory that is impossible to encompass. However, I do not let go of my link to the academic work of communication, hence my primordial interest in the media and its role in the conformation of subjectivities<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, I make use, especially, of insights of two authors: Nick Couldry (2000, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012) and Richard Johnson (1999). Also, but quite superficially, I try to follow some leads left by Velho (2006), especially for the treatment of empirical materials.

The conceptual scheme that fundamentals this study is only briefly outlined. I favor the exposition of the materials collected in the field and the veins opened by their interpretation, emphasizing the constitution of identities permeated by the action of the media. However, I would like to point out that, in Cultural Studies, the problematic of the individual and his or her connections to society and culture, from the standpoint we are interested in exploring herein, clearly invokes the works by Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart.

In the case of Williams, it is precisely when he makes a point of thinking culture *in* society, and not separate from it, defining it by the “lived experience” of “ordinary” men and women, that is, an experience built on the daily interaction with the texts and practices of daily life, that we have, at the same time, a rupture with the dominant British thinking and the setting out of the foundations of a new tradition of culture

---

<sup>2</sup> Here, I do not theorize on the terms subjectivity, self and identity, and use them interchangeably.

analysis. Simply putting it, the motto launched by the author was to study *our* culture, the culture *we* live and form.

Hoggart makes this same idea the fuel of his research, although differently from the mainly theoretical trajectory of Williams. The recognition of the experiences of the common man, his attitudes, values shared in everyday life, his habits and forms of language, in sum, the consideration of a way of life, by himself, not inferred, becomes object and is part of his research method. Moreover, it is a marked rupture with the cultural criticism of the time, in parallel to that of Williams, as well as another foundation of Cultural Studies.

Of contemporary thinking, I highlight a suggestion made by Couldry (2000: 52), who asserts:

If we are serious about studying culture, we cannot avoid listening to the individual voice. I have argued this, negatively, against the grain of some early British cultural studies, but here I want to put the point more positively through specific examples of where the individual perspective on culture makes a difference.

Later on, the author develops a reflection and specific questionings on different meanings and aspects on the importance and value of the study of voice (COULDRY, 2010). Some aspects are more philosophical, the voice as reflexivity and responsibility for our actions, for example. Others are more sociological questions: Would neoliberalism be a rationality that undermines or celebrates the value of voice? Or, else, emphasizing the role of the media: Would the space given to the voice in the mainstream media amplify or normalize values important to neoliberalism? In this stage of the research, I use these contributions more as a justification to indicate the emphasis put on the individual participants, for there is a clear indication that the voice of each person has value and should be taken as a beginning to develop cultural analyses, than actually to explore them theoretically and/or methodologically.

Nevertheless, assuming a perspective centered in the tripod individual-media-society requires a broader horizon, as I have affirmed other times (for example, in ESCOSTEGUY; BRAUN, 2013), where the long-range consequences of living in a scenario ingrained by the media are included. “A media saturated world is a world

where actions oriented to media are precisely not limited to production, direct consumption, and further circulation” (COULDRY, 2009: 40). These are very simple solutions to face the problem of “living with the media”<sup>3</sup> (COULDRY, 2010: 290).

In an attempt to follow this type of approach we should avoid the trap of studies circumscribed to production, text, or consumption, for especially the latter comprise analyses that privilege the specificity of localized and discrete experiences *with* the media. In general, they intend to capture a specific moment of interaction with the media. The particular studies just mentioned are compartmentalized views and do not embrace the complexity and scope of the mentioned situation.

As a corollary, our study object broadens and requires a “wide-angle” lens, as suggested by Spitulnik (2010). What happens when we amplify the framing this way? “How will we define our units of analysis? How will we delimitate our study objects? [...] Because obviously in a research project one cannot go all directions” (SPITULNIK, 2010: 107 and 111). This is not new for us. Perhaps we still face the challenge that Martín-Barbero proposed us in *Dos meios às mediações* ([1987] 1997), when the author pointed out that the boundaries of our study object have expanded.

I take advantage of the mention to an author that is so well-known among us in the Latin American academic circles to ratify once again the choice made in this research. For this Spanish-Colombian author, communication processes are “phenomena of production of identity, reconstitution of subjects, social players”, and means of communication “are not a pure commercial phenomenon, not a pure phenomenon of ideological manipulation; they are a cultural phenomenon through which one person or many persons (...) live the constitution of the meaning of their lives” (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1995: 71).

This theoretical indication articulated to another of Richard Johnson (1998: 104) that claims the validity of a “discursive self-production of subjects”, enabled in face of a “form of histories and memories”, constitute the foundation that drives the collection of biographical accounts. By taking up this idea as a north to our empirical research, we

---

<sup>3</sup> Bird (2003) and Couldry (2009) coincide in the need to broaden the view of media studies.

understand narratives as a basic form of organization of subjectivity and narrative itself not only reflecting or reporting experience but also producing it.

If we treat these not as archetypes but as historically-produced constructions, the possibilities for fruitful concrete studies on a wide range of materials is immense. For stories obviously come not merely in the form of bookish or filmic fictions but also in everyday conversation, in everyone's imagined futures and daily projections, and in the construction of identities, individual and collective (JOHNSON, 1998: 95).

Therefore, we assume that, by collecting life stories, obtained via biographical interviews, we have as a result revealing identity narratives of a specific way of being that is constituted in the act of reporting itself.

Because the account of a life, both in an interview and in other genre, is not only to put in order dissimilar events, neither to temporally articulate different memories: it is, as each narrative, an attribution of meaning. And the narrative is not a mere 'representation' of what happened; it is a form that makes intelligible what happened; it is the construction that postulates relations that perhaps do not exist in another place: chances, causalities, interpretations. (...) The account of a life is, thus, related to the meaning of life, even if the narrator him or herself is not aware of it (ARFUCH, 2010: 89).

Obviously, other issues are involved in these histories, issues that go beyond the narrator-individual involvement, especially the structuration of society and culture. Hence the claim made by Couldry (2000: 44) that "the individual self is formed within culture, and on the basis of shared cultural resources". Moreover, the claim that all biographical account is situated within a historical-social horizon, highlighting the interrelation between social and individual dynamics. Here I take as a reference the research done by Velho (2006: 55): "Far from hiding the weight and importance of society that, in some way, produces individuals, we would seek to better understand how social and cultural grammar is expressed at the biographical level". In this specific case, we point out the manifestation of the media in biographical accounts.

Considering the ideas above, which have been presented generally, we have conducted an empirical research, experimenting with a methodological strategy composed of biographical interviews. The result obtained using the technique we are denominating herein identity narratives. These are configured by the way individuals

render meaning to their experiences in a concrete and specific interaction where they are instigated to “tell their lives”. Based on this experience, we suggest that: a) narratives are constructed in face of cultural conventions that are circulating in the media; b) among these conventions, one highlights the presence of characteristics of the genre melodrama and a process of heroization; and c) these identity narratives are revealing of larger and broader cultural processes, expressing the fluid and pervasive presence of the media in ways of being.

The present text is greatly a result of the itinerary covered by a research group<sup>4</sup> that started its work in 2010 when it proposed the research project entitled “The visibility of the ordinary life of destitute women in the media” to the Special Program of Social Inclusion, Equality and Citizenship of CNPq, which approved its financing. It is worth mentioning that this synthesis does not approach the debate on social class implicit to the use of the term “destitute” in the title of the proposition, neither its combination with the conceptual issue referring to gender (see ESCOSTEGUY; SIFUENTES, 2011). Also, it does not describe in detail its incursions in the field, neither its implementation of other techniques used in different stages – structured interview, semi-structured interview, socio-economical questionnaire – which has been done elsewhere (for example, ESCOSTEGUY et al, 2012; ESCOSTEGUY et al, 2013; ESCOSTEGUY; BRAUN, 2013). Moreover, much less it intends to present a vigorous theoretical picture on the theoretical problematic mentioned above. Its objective is much more modest: to justify and illustrate a possible approach, constituted within Communication, in order to deal with the relations between the individual, society, and the media, even if the present paper explores mainly links between the formation of individual identities and the media.

---

<sup>4</sup> Under my coordination, in the first phase (2011), the group was composed by Lirian Sifuentes (doctoral student at PUCRS), Bruna Rocha Silveira (doctoral student at UFRGS), Helen Garcez Braun (Master’s at PUCRS), Lúcia Coutinho (doctoral student at PUCRS), and Jéssica de Souza Barbosa (Bachelor in Journalism at PUCRS); in the second phase (2012), Lirian Sifuentes, Bruna Rocha Silveira, Lúcia Coutinho, Helena Gertz (Bachelor in Journalism at PUCRS), Ângela Felippi (professor at UNISC), Laura Wottrich (doctoral student at UFRGS), and Renata Córdova da Silva (Master’s at UFSM). I would like to thank the contributions made by the group, and I make use of their various collective productions.

## 2. Reflections on an experience: the individual voice as a research strategy

Part of the empiric research<sup>5</sup> conducted in 2012 consisted in asking a group of women to tell about their lives. This way of conducting the interview allowed us to avoid a direct question about the topic of this investigation, that is, the presence of media in the configuration of ways of being. The option for a conversation, a dialogue with these women, instead of impersonal forms, highlights the importance of allowing the women interviewed to indicate more or less spontaneously the dimension in which media is a part or not of their everyday lives, without imposing the research topic. Within this parameter, six women were interviewed.

The story narrated in this specific situation is somewhat linked to the biographical genres, be them autobiographies, testimonials, memories, or journals. Possibly, a difference in relation to them is the fact that it is narrated in a face-to-face contact, a communicative context, which at least in this case bears some immediatism. Another difference is that it does not postulate in itself the knowledge of facts, but rather the self-production of a report on who one is, for oneself and for others. Hence, its result is called identitary narrative, for it configures the intricate dynamics of identity formation.

The criterion chosen to select the women interviewed was the fact that they did not hold positions that require a formal qualification. These activities are not valued much in our society inasmuch as they do not require formal knowledge or skills that depend on a specific formation. This group was composed by workers of the cosmetics sector. Thus, all participants had as occupation a manual activity, indifferent of their income. It should be pointed out that, although they may have some formation, this is not a requirement for them to occupy the position. Moreover, it is important to point out that most of them were already acquainted with interviewers.

Next, I put forward considerations taken from the entire material collected. I try to avoid mentioning examples of the different stories and documenting interpretations,

---

<sup>5</sup> The first incursion in the field was discussed and problematized in ESCOSTEGUY et al (2012).

illustrating them with talk extracted from the respective stories. Although this procedure was adopted in more than one occasion, it does not account for the dramaticity and totality of the materials. On the contrary, it fragments the narratives and weakens their strength. By re-reading these studies that have cut the accounts up, even if these cuttings were done based on recurrent themes found in them, there is a clear impression of loss of density, which makes stories seem superficial, or even almost banal. I now make another attempt to show the evidences: first, I present general observations; then, I try to reconstitute a narrative, acknowledging that I continue exercising a power of intervention as I wrote down the history that will be told. Thus, I intend to preserve the “emotional flavor” that definitively sets the boundaries of each narrative collected. Somewhat fearfully, I presume that each narrative speaks for itself.

Each woman told her story from her own starting point, pointing out triggering actions of her trajectory. In general, interviewed women started their narratives in the past. However, this past was not necessarily composed of references involving their family roots and heritage (where they were born, who their parents were, for example); this past was composed of striking facts (teenage pregnancies and rural exodus, among others). One notes that all of them revealed themselves more as narratives in retrospective, involving a process of reflection between past and present, including even the stories whose starting point is present life. Following the reflection of Couldry (2010), one could say that in this interview process the voice of these women became effective, since each one engaged herself in an account that revealed itself as a time to reflect, both backwards and forward in time, among actions, experiences, and thoughts.

By telling their stories, the women interviewed spoke fundamentally in the first person singular. Narrators were always in the center of the stories. And even the setbacks – early motherhood, illnesses, separation, divorce, excessive changes of cities to be with significant others or the death of a relative – were affirmatively transformed in motivating ruptures to move forward. None of them showed commiseration in face of such mishaps, on the contrary. After obstacles and misfortunes, their motivation was renewed to move ahead. Thus, it is clear that when telling their stories the women highlighted their protagonism in face of life’s adversities, constituting a process of

heroization, emphasizing certain virtues that in the end allowed them to overcome.

In the literature about this topic, the hero is usually presented as one who abandons the common world to accomplish extraordinary, divine and legendary achievements. A distancing from everyday life is a prerogative of the hero, who abdicates from the comfort of the family to fight with courage and reach impossible accomplishments, seek virtue, fame and glory (FEATHERSTONE, 1992). Nevertheless, today's heroes distance themselves from this image: they are immersed in everyday life, they seek their own well-being and personal fulfillment, certainly facing sacrifice, suffering, and making much effort to reach their final reward. "Each period of time creates its heroes and grants them their own values, be it from a far, near, or present time", Dosse teaches us (2009: 151). In other words, the values of *this* time along with the social group researched are embodied in singular and individual paths.

The ability to face hard tests by means of dedication, discipline and sacrifice indicates trademarks of a heroic ethos. These women overcome setbacks through values such as abnegation, sacrifice and dedication, lived every day, embodied at work, and from which the women interviewed seem to feel valued. It is these traits of character found in the narratives collected that allow women to establish themselves as heroines. On one hand, one could say that the victim-character, typical of the core of the melodrama, is personified in these women: "a character whose *weakness* calls for protection all the time – exciting the protective feeling of the audience – but whose virtue is a *force* that causes admiration and somehow tranquilizes" (Martín-Barbero, 1997: 164). On the other hand, one could say that these women break the thread of victimization through the *force* they reveal when they overcome disgrace and misfortunes.

We then consider that the life stories of the women interviewed are exemplary accounts that make visible heroines of today: women capable of overcoming the different challenges of life in the name, above all, of dedication and love to their children and family. These are women immersed in the everyday life who prove themselves courageous and resilient so that they may reach achievements, especially, personal, since individual success is greater value of our time and fundamentally of

contemporary Brazil.

Along with the identification of a process of heroization, we observe the full presence of the characteristics of a melodrama. All narratives have a strong emotional appeal related, above all, to family and love life, where no circumstance of social or economic aspect is remembered as an impediment for making dreams come true. Characteristics typical of a melodrama, where all conflicts are overcome in the name of love, virtue, and justice. However, this element of the melodrama is also re-signified by the women interviewed, who renew it. The accounts show that reparation of justice is achieved by economic success, which in turn is obtained by dedication to work. This topic is on the media agenda, through a profusion of journalistic reports centered, for example, in the purchase power of a “new middle class”<sup>6</sup>.

In general, these narratives are revealed as stories of perseverance and have invariably a positive outcome as well as an edifying effect. On the first, much has been said about *happy ending* in mass culture. Among the classics on the subject, Morin (1987: 93) states:

(...) a *happy ending* implies an intensified attachment to an identification with the hero. At the same time that heroes approach everyday humanity, from which they emerge, that they impose their psychological problems, they are less and less officiating of a sacred mystery to become the alter ego of spectators. The sentimental and personal link that is established between spectators and the hero is such, in the new atmosphere of affection, realism and psychologism, that spectators do not stand their alter ego to be slain. On the contrary, spectators expect the success, the proof that happiness is possible.

And happiness becomes possible and is reached by women in the age span investigated, between 35 and 59 years<sup>7</sup>, especially because they adapt to the general rules of society, expressing only specific and localized dissatisfactions. Besides this type of outcome, we also observe that narratives are connected to a moral, the second aspect previously

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *O que a nova classe média quer vestir?* (Época, online, 24/08/2012, see <http://colunas.revistaepoca.globo.com/mulher7por7/2012/08/24/o-que-a-nova-classe-media-quer-vestir/>, accessed on Sept 2, 2013); 46% of the C class has a favorite brand (Carta Capital, online, September 5, 2012, see <http://www.cartacapital.com.br/economia/46-da-classe-c-nao-tem-marca-favorita>, accessed on September 2, 2013); *A nova classe média vai aos antiquários* (O Globo, online, June 11, 2012 <http://oglobo.globo.com/imoveis/a-nova-classe-media-vai-aos-antiquarios-5168066>, accessed on September 2, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> From the interview of Augusta (hairdresser, waxing specialist, and masseur), I highlight the incisive way she ends her story, validating the idea of the attainment of happiness: “In short, that’s it. I think, like, there are people that are not as happy as I am, right? Really! I have four wonderful, beautiful children! Perfect! Perfect and beautiful! Intelligent! I have nothing to complain about”.

mentioned. This is another convergence with the melodrama, in which the adventures of characters is not exterior to moral acts (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1997).

The form – melodramatic, also associated to the process of heroization – the women construct their narratives is related to the ways through which identities are being constituted, in face of cultural practices permeated especially by the action of the media. In the media the presence of different formats based on melodrama is recognized – be it in fiction (most evidently in the *telenovelas*), be it in journalism (mainly but not exclusively in popular journalism). As a result, we relate the way the women interviewed tell their stories with the way used by the media to produce different accounts, without an explicit mention to it. It is thus that we notice a convergence in the values emphasized and the way the women interviewed narrate their lives and those present in several narratives, produced and disseminated by the media, especially in television, which is exactly one of the most frequently mentioned means of communication and the most present one in the life of the women interviewed<sup>8</sup>. In other words, we see a practice related to the media, even if not associated to a particular text or a specific set of texts (Couldry, 2012).

### 3. The always-partial account of a life story

To illustrate the results commented above, I chose the life history of Vani, not because it is typical of what has been mentioned, for all stories contained the characteristics indicated above. Some have, in certain moments, much more striking talks<sup>9</sup>. However, compared to some accounts that were laconic, I believe this interview was successful. What follows is not a transcript and has my intervention as it has

---

<sup>8</sup> After the narration of personal stories, in a new situation of interview, a socioeconomic questionnaire was applied, containing questions about consumption and habits related to the media; the presence of the media was a piece of information not asked directly to interviewees. The most consumed media were TV, newspapers, Internet, and magazines. The means of communication, especially newspapers and magazines, were usually consumed at the beauty salon, where they spent most of their day. This is the case of Vani, whose narrative is presented next. She reads Zero Hora, the most importante newspaper of Rio Grande do Sul, and Diário Gaúcho, a popular local newspaper. Her favorite magazines are Caras and Cláudia. As to TV, interviewees mentioned watching it “at home”, where they also accessed Internet; however, at work, TV occupies a special place and is almost permanently on. Vani said she is not very interested in TV and that she prefers reading.

<sup>9</sup> It is the case of Augusta, mentioned on note 6.

already been admitted. However, I seek to preserve its tone, the order of events reported, and, especially, the emphasis given by Vani, although in some moments I make cuts and compile the observations spread out in the account of the events<sup>10</sup>.

I have known Vani for a long time. For over three years, I have been a regular customer of the beauty salon where she works as a manicure. The shop is simple, although located in an upper class neighborhood of Porto Alegre (RS), Brazil. My appointments with Vani usually last thirty minutes, sometimes, one hour. In general, we make small talk. Sometimes, we stay quiet, while she concentrates on her work. When she has a book with her, usually a detective story, sitting on the shelf next to her workstation, she tells me about it, or she tells me about the customer who gave or lent the book to her. Other times, she talks about Guilherme, her youngest son, who lives with her. More rarely, she talks about her daughter. Sometimes, she asks me about my daughter, her studies, her boyfriend, in sum, if “the life is good”. When I take longer trips, I always try to bring her a souvenir. I noticed that she appreciates it. In some cases, I observed that she attributes usefulness to the gifts. Our relationship is friendly, polite, and we are socially interested in each other.

The first time I mentioned the research I was conducting and I asked if she would like to tell about her life, she promptly said yes. Before any more detailed explanation or comments on the topic of the investigation and the interview, she went on saying that she knew why I had chosen her story: she was a woman who had raised alone her children. I was surprised by her self-declaration.

In the following week, as usual, I arrived in the beauty salon at the appointed time. Sitting comfortably in her usual place, she started work and immediately started talking about her life. However, we had not formally agreed that the interview would be on that day. I had to ask her to postpone the interview, since I did not have the tape recorder with me that day. I explained that I needed to record the interview and that I had not explained that to her when I invited her to participate. I asked her if there would be any problem, if she would be comfortable with recording, and if she agreed to it. She

---

<sup>10</sup> Listening to the recording of the interview, reading again its transcripts and the summary presented, I recognize the interference and interiorization of the values of the group I belong to, which reveals a control of feelings, in an opposite direction to the narrative of Vani.

had no inconvenience and said that yes we could leave the interview for the following week; however, in several moments, during that appointment, any way she made occasional comments in regards to her life. That was good; I got to know a little more about her trajectory. I confess that, in that occasion, I felt a little inhibited. Our conversation was not the usual and, from my point of view, it was something intimate, more difficult to be shared with someone who was acquainted but did not belong to her network of friendships neither occupied the same social position.

On the day scheduled, I returned more confident to the beauty salon. Our research group met weekly and some members of the group had reported situations lived during their interviews. This helped me. On the day of the interview, I had scheduled a time I knew there would be few customers in the shop. The flat screen TV, installed in one of the columns of the room, in a highly visible place, was off. Vani made herself comfortable in her chair; all employees have their own workstation in this shop. I also took my seat. Even before turning on the tape recorder, she started telling me she was “given” to her grandmother to be raised on a farm. She was the only child in the house. When she was seven years old, she moved back to the city, Erechim (in the countryside of the state of Rio Grande do Sul), a fact she regretted, because she liked life in the countryside. In the house of her father, who was a mason and a carpenter, there were another five children: her brother and sisters. As far as she remembered, she was never sick, only had “skin problems, itching”. At the age of eleven, her mother had tuberculosis and moved to Porto Alegre. She stayed with her father, taking care of her brother and sisters: her youngest brother, Marcos, was two years old; her sister Jé “must have been ” four; her sister Leti, six; and her sister Laila, eight. Her oldest sister, fourteen at the time, did not stay with them, because she “hated” her brother and sisters. “I think she wanted to be an only child. That’s so interesting!”, she said. Her mother passed away. After that, she looked after her brother and sisters. Despite it all, she thinks hers is a tight-knit family: “I love my brother and sisters. I love. We are a very close family. We have lost our father and our mother. But we are together until today”. For a short time, later, she went back to live with her grandparents: “But I had a fight with my grandma because I partied a lot!” Then she moved to her father’s home again, where she

stayed until she married, at the age of nineteen.

At the age of twenty-one, she had her first daughter, Jo, and, at twenty-six, her son, Guilherme. Until then she considered herself a “well-resolved” person; she was not that the sort of person who “bothered”. She made this affirmation several times. When Guilherme started showing signs of “mental retardation” she was referred to group therapy. Therapy was to help her understand her son and deal with him. It was to help “solution (the problems of) the little mothers”. She recognizes that she learned a lot, but she also admitted she did not need therapy because she was “well resolved”. “I am well resolved because I am Aries. Aries persons are well resolved. No Aries women have problems. You can count on that. Any Aries woman I know is well resolved. Talk to an Aries woman and you will see, because Aries women are very well resolved; they resolve it, and that’s it. They do not cry over spilled milk. None of them do. None.”

It was only after her second child was born that she began to realize the constant absence of her husband and to feel “bothered”. Guilherme needed medical care more often than her daughter. When she needed her husband to take the baby to the doctor: “Where was Carlos? Messing around, in a *pagode*<sup>11</sup> circle, slacking... I had to go after him, call him...”. She felt alone and tired of this situation because she did not have anyone she could “count on” in the most difficult moments. Until this moment, “I did not think much about this sort of thing [separation] because you get involved with the children and Gui’s illness took a lot of my time. Then I got bothered with Carlos. Carlos was a real, real womanizer. He could not see a woman...”

Vani and Carlos were more or less the same age; their birthdays were close together. Their marriage lasted for 12 years. “I pushed on a horrible marriage. Those arguments, those fights, those horrors, those horrible things... that we went through. We did not fight more because I did not argue. I never argued. I’m not the type who argues. I don’t argue with anybody, do you understand?” She would leave him yelling because, in these occasions, she would simply leave home. “He would want to hit me and it wouldn’t be a good thing. If he touched me, I think I would kill him... what an unpleasant thing. I was not raised like that. I was not brought up in this kind of

---

<sup>11</sup> Pagode: a popular rhythm derived from samba.

environment. Never. By the way, my mom was the one who would fight in our home!” Her father was like her. When the “storm” set in, her father would put on his cap and leave calmly. He would come back home when the “storm” was over.

Vani said that when you are young and have children, you get very much involved with their upbringing and, therefore, these stressful situations pass until the day “you get tired”. Then she told her husband she wanted to separate. “I never bothered much. I am not the type of person who bothers because I carry on, until the day I say: Enough. The day I say *enough*, there is no going back”. In fact, she did not change her mind, although her husband did not want the divorce, “obviously”. It took a long time, three years, but she got it.

Firstly, she got sick. When Guilherme was eleven months old, she was hospitalized. She was twenty-seven years old and weighed fifty-five kilos; she had never taken any antibiotics. She discovered she was “allergic to penicillin”. She was hospitalized for three weeks with hepatitis, intestinal infection, and gynecological infection. “From that I got worse and worse. Then I found out I had tuberculosis”. When she was discharged from hospital, she weighed forty kilos.

Her account on the difficulties to separate from her husband associated to problems of “dependence”, “hospitalization”, medication to her “nerves”, “suicide”, “morbid jealousy”, consultations with a “doctor”, “psychiatrist”, “analyst” even the “treatment with a psychologist that practically cured him” is not clear. Later, she also refers to a “drunk man”, clearly referring to Carlos, affirming that she did not stand any more the situation of her marriage. I did not ask for clarifications in regards to these situations because it was clear that she “did not want him anymore. Too much work... (she) was not interested any more”.

The conclusion reached by Vani is that she “shouldn’t have married”. “I’m not fit for marriage.” When thinking back at the time she was married, she says, “I had to take care of life for my husband”. She considers that today she is different but that anyway she “think(s) it is very hard (she) will get married” again. Although, since then, she has had boyfriends, “never again” somebody lived with her: “I have not got married.”

When she had her first daughter, Vani stopped working for two years. She had taken the complete course to be a hairdresser at the age of seventeen and already worked as a manicure. After the birth of Guilherme, it was more difficult to reconcile the two activities; she stopped working for another three years. It was important to have “financial independence”, although her husband never complained because of money. She said that, at one point, he had an automobile repair shop with five employees; the shop “was high standard”; her husband was “responsible for his employees” but also a “boxer”, an “athlete”, and a “card player”. Moreover, their neighbors thought he was “polite”, “kind”, and “helpful”. “He had these two sides to himself. He was the head of the family, a provider. Money was not a problem for him. I did not have this problem with him. Having a prosperous business, but there was that side that he did those things. I did not accept that. And he used to argue with me. He would make jealousy scenes. He used to drive me crazy. I couldn’t understand it.”

Despite this financial situation, they did not own a home; they always paid rent. And, from the moment she decided to separate, she knew she would not have a “pension, (she) needed to work, make (her) life”. And that was what happened. Six months into being separated, Carlos left. He would occasionally send some money, but she could not count on it. In 1991, she bought the house where she lives in until today, in Jardim Carvalho, a middle class neighborhood in Porto Alegre. After the separation, she has always been the single provider at home. Besides working as a manicure, she weaves, embroiders, and does crafts, thus complementing her income. She has a small farm, together with one of her sisters, where she goes occasionally, but this place does not have electricity yet. She lives with her son. Her daughter is married and lives elsewhere.

According to Vani, the biggest reason that prevented her from separating was that Carlos wanted custody of their daughter. At that time, she says, “the creature” needed to accept for the mother to stay with the children, especially in the case of daughters. “Daughters belong to the man and sons belong to the woman”. “Today, yes, the woman can say ‘I’m leaving’, she takes her children and goes”. But she did not want to let go of her daughter Jo, and this was “the biggest fight”, which cost her another

long and arduous period of coexistence, fighting for separation. Many times she felt like leaving.

She recalls that, one time, returning from a visit to her lawyer, without a solution to marital situation, she looked to her house and thought: “I’m not going in, I’m leaving.” However, she entered and looked at her son Guilherme. “Gui, sick. There was no way how to. He would not survive. That was for sure. My father, who lived with me at the time, in a house in Cristal, told me: ‘You wanted to leave, sweetie?’ My father was the son of an Indian. He had seen me; he was outside. I said: ‘I wanted’. And he said: ‘You will get out of this, sweetie’. And I said: ‘I will, Dad, you can be sure I will get rid of this creep’”.

#### **4. On the Conclusions**

Since the research is still ongoing, I rehearse some reflections in order to close the present paper. In light of the more general objective of the present paper, explained in its beginning, the empirical research conducted is only the opening of a horizon to be explored. The empirical materials collected indicate that it is indeed possible to distance oneself from identity studies centered in media representations and, therefore, discursive forms (see ESCOSTEGUY; SIFUENTES, 2011) to develop another approach, even if discursive, concentrated in narrative forms through which individuals not only report, order and describe their experiences but also construct and produce a specific way of being.

At least two other questions, correlated to what has been said, should be pointed out. The first question considers the existence of an amalgam that unifies narratives, at least as to those collected so far, which is revealed by its dramatic potential and by a process of heroization; at the same time, these are individual and unique paths, which are also characterized by their particularization. On one hand, this leads us to see cultural cohesion; on the other hand, it leads us to insist on viewing individual practices of attributing meaning to the culture lived in and, being a part of both movements, the self-production of subjectivities. As suggested by Couldry (2000: 63), “studying the texture of individual voices, in other words, if done properly, brings us back inexorably

to wider structural questions about power and the workings of social and cultural institutions – which is exactly where we should be”. By taking this perspective, our research makes a commitment to the challenge of building bridges between social organization, social action and the production of meaning, emphasizing the specificity of the media in molding identities.

The second question refers to the methodological strategy adopted, the biographical interview, as detailed above. Differently from what has been said on another occasion (ESCOSTEGUY et al, 2012), opting for not questioning directly about the media does not disappoint if the collected narratives are seen from the standpoint of conventions and schemes as well as from the standpoint of values that are activated in their structuration more than in the explicit mentioning of contents that the media puts into circulation. However, the crossing overs between the media and the voices of informants, expressed by the incorporation of this type of cultural convention, present both in the media and in identity narratives, cannot be understood by means of a linear and one-way logic, that is, resulting from alterations caused directly by the media in individuals. On the contrary, this process is best understood if it “emphasize(s) the heterogeneity of the transformations to which media give rise across a complex and divided social space”; therefore, it refers to long-range consequences and to a multidirectional dynamics (COULDRY, 2008: 375). In order to constitute this type of approach, one possibility is to invest in the study of media-oriented practices, a challenge in which this investigation is engaged.

## References

ARFUCH, Leonor. **La entrevista, una invención dialógica**. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2010.

BIRD, Elizabeth S. **The audience in everyday life: Living in a media world**. Nova York/London: Routledge, 2003.

COULDRY, Nick. **Inside culture – Re-imagining the method of cultural studies**. London: Sage, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understandings of the

emergent space of digital storytelling. **New Media & Society**, v. 10, n3, p. 373-391, 2008.

\_\_\_\_\_. My media studies: Thoughts from Nick Couldry. **Television & New Media**, v.10, n.1, p. 40-42, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Why voice matters – Culture and politics after neoliberalism**. London: Sage, 2010.

\_\_\_\_\_. **Media, society, world. Social theory and digital media practice**. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

DOSSE, François. **O desafio biográfico – Escrever uma vida**. São Paulo: Edusp, 2009.

ESCOSTEGUY, Ana Carolina e SIFUENTES, Lírian. As relações de classe e gênero no contexto de práticas orientadas pela mídia: apontamentos teóricos. **Revista e-compós**, vol. 14, n 2, p. 1-13, 2011.

ESCOSTEGUY, A.C.; SIFUENTES, L.; SILVEIRA, B. R.; OLIVEIRA, J.; BRAUN, H.G. Mídia e identidade de mulheres destituídas: uma discussão metodológica. **Revista Galáxia**, São Paulo, n. 23, p. 153-164, jun. 2012.

ESCOSTEGUY, A.C.; BRAUN, H.G. Histórias de mulheres como narrativas identitárias: considerações teóricas e metodológicas. **Revista Rizoma**, Santa Cruz do Sul, v. 1, n. 1, p. 46-55, jul. 2013.

ESCOSTEGUY, A. C.; SIFUENTES, L.; WOTTRICH, L. H.; SILVA, R. C. História de mulheres: heroínas de uma narrativa melodramática. **Revista Intexto**, Porto Alegre, UFRGS, n 28, p. 100-117, jul. 2013.

FEATHERSTONE, Mike. The heroic life and everyday life. **Theory Culture Society**, vol. 9, 1992, pp.159-182.

JOHNSON, Richard. O que é, afinal, estudos culturais? [1986]. In: SILVA, Tomás Tadeu da (org.) **O que é, afinal, estudos culturais?** Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 1999.

MARTÍN-BARBERO, Jesús. Secularización, desencanto y reencantamiento massmediático. **Revista Dia-logos de la Comunicación**, 41, 1995, p. 71-81.

MARTÍN-BARBERO, Jesús. **Dos meios às mediações. Comunicação, cultura e hegemonia**. Rio de Janeiro: editor UFRJ, 1997.

MORIN, Edgar. **Cultura de massas no século XX- O espírito do tempo – I**. Rio de Janeiro: Forense-Universitária, 1987.

SILVERSTONE, Roger. The sociology of mediation and communication. In: CALHOUN, Craig; ROJEK, Chris; TURNER, B. (org). **The Sage Handbook of Sociology**. London: Sage, 2005.

SPITULNIK, Debra. Thick context, deep epistemology: a mediation on wide-angle lenses on media, knowledge production and the concept of culture. In BRAUCHLER, Birgit e POSTILL, John (ogs.) **Theorising media and practice**. New York: Berghan Books, 2010.

VELHO, Gilberto. **Subjetividade e sociedade – Uma experiência de geração**. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, (2006).

*This text was received at 4 September and accepted at 18 October 2013.*