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Gender, activism and social change: Reframing the contemporary heroine

Gabriela Díaz de Sabatés *

Abstract: Because society is shaped through the stories we tell, women's testimonies are of foundational relevance when we reflect on social change, since their stories reinvent not only individual but also collective identity. As an examination from a life narrative perspective on how women view, enact, and reformulate their role in society, this paper centers on the testimony of Dr. Diana Maffía, whom –among other noteworthy womenwas instrumental in solidifying the work on gender and feminist perspective in Argentina since the early 1980s.

This paper is an approach to Maffía's story, about her growing up during military dictatorship, her early years as a philosophy student at the University of Buenos Aires, her embrace of feminism, and the weaving of her two passions that resulted in the establishment of a permanent presence of the concept of gender within the very structure of Argentinean society. Maffía's narrative brings to light the work that unsung heroines do throughout their lives, evidencing that women have always been at the forefront of generating and sustaining change.

Keywords: Women - heroine's path - feminism - life story - Argentina - gender - activism - social change - knowledge production - philosophical feminism - dictatorship - gender oppression.

[Resúmenes en inglés y portugués en las páginas 208 - 209]

⁽¹⁾ Licenciada en Psicología (UBA, Argentina), Magister en Educación (Harvard, EEUU) y Doctora en Educación (Kansas State University, EEUU). Sus áreas de investigación incluyen género, mujeres y educación, narrativas de vida, migraciones, violencia de género, y feminismos latinoamericanos. Es profesora de Columbia College Chicago, coordinadora del Programa de Estudios Latinoamericanos de la misma institución y forma parte del equipo internacional de investigación sobre la feminización de las migraciones auspiciado por el gobierno español. Es fundadora de la Serie de Conferencias de los Estudios Latinoamericanos de Columbia College Chicago. "In their quest for equal rights, organized women have been ridiculed, underappreciated, killed. But it seems that within the last decade, all of a sudden, equality is within reach. Film protagonists embodying presidents, important politicians, CEOs of financial corporations: The image has been created, but universality is forbidden to them; being different (from men) is still seen as contingent, anecdotal, not constitutive of humanity." (Francesca Gargallo - 2013)

Introduction

This paper proposes to rethink and reframe the "path of the heroine" by taking a look at the impact that unsung heroines had at challenging misogynistic and outdated societal norms. It is a first step into the identification and analysis of patriarchal (1) power structures embedded in the very process of generating knowledge (especially in academia), and evidencing women's efforts to subvert those structures and generate change toward gender equity.

This paper relies on the life narrative of Dr. Diana Maffía, an Argentinean intellectual and philosopher. Maffía has worked since her college years toward gender equity in academia and, later, within the judiciary system in Argentina. She has a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Buenos Aires and is the director of the Autonomic City of Buenos Aires Judiciary Council's Gender Observatory. Maffía's narrative addresses, among other subjects, gender violence embedded within Argentinean society between 1970's and the end of the XX century, including the last military dictatorship that Argentina suffered from 1976 to 1983. Her testimony allows for the analysis of how patriarchal power, rooted in the very structure of society, affects and undermines women's gender roles, participation in the production of knowledge, and their access to equal rights.

Relevance of life narratives

In this paper life narratives are used as a research method. The experiential knowledge that women have is legitimate, appropriate, and critical for the understanding and analysis of social contexts where different types of oppressions intersect. Life narratives provide direct insight into movements of cultural transgression and social change.

In studying narrative inquiry, Finnish sociologists Hyvärinen, Korhonen, and Mykkänen (2006) stated that over the last three decades the concept of narrative has travelled successfully from literature to several new disciplines such as social sciences, law, psychology, education, and health studies, among others. Narrative methods have proliferated in many fields. In the U.S.A., psychological theorists such as Jerome Bruner emphasized the storied nature of human lives and human conduct. Bruner was one of the cognitive psychology movement pioneers in the U.S.A. interested not only in how an individual responded to stimuli, but particularly in how the individual *interpreted* such stimuli (Bruner, 1990). Bruner advocated for a more holistic understanding of the mind and its production

of cognition, culminating his work in the development of a theory of individuals' narrative construction of reality. In his theory, Bruner affirmed the importance of understanding how the mind makes sense of the world in a narrative form (Bruner, 1990).

Also, in a chapter for the *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology*, Dan McAdams and Erika Manczak (2015i) wrote:

Life stories do not simply reflect personality. They are personality, or more accurately, they are important parts of personality, along with other parts, like dispositional traits, goals, and values.

McAdams wrote extensively about the importance that oral narratives have in the life of individuals. He argued that oral narratives create and sustain a person's internalized and evolving life story wherein the individual reconstructs their past and imagines the future to provide their life with some degree of unity. McAdams developed a life-story model of adult identity where people living in modern societies start organizing their lives in narrative terms in late adolescence and young adulthood. Individuals create internalized and evolving life stories that serve to reconstruct the past and anticipate the future in ways that provide their lives with some degree of unity and purpose. In an interview by The Atlantic online in August 2015, McAdams stated:

In the realm of narrative psychology, a person's life story is not like a Wikipedia biography of the facts and events of a life, but rather the way a person integrates those facts and events internally—picks them apart and weaves them back together to make meaning. This narrative becomes a form of identity, in which the elements that someone chooses to include in the story and the way they tell it, can both reflect and shape who the person is. A life story doesn't just say what happened, it says why what happened is important, what it means for whom the person is, for who they'll become, and for what happens next.

Therefore, constructing and internalizing a life story is at the center of an individual's sense of identity (McAdams, 2015). Further, McAdams argued that the construction of a life story is always done within a specific socio-cultural and political context: The power of conversation and social contextualization are essential for learning narrative skills, shaping identity expectations, and formulating meaningful stories for one's life, reinforcing the powerful significance of social context. Narrative identity is always contextualized in culture (McAdams, 2015).

Holling (2006) went further and connected life stories with gender. Holling stated that life narratives allow researchers' access to women's direct accounts of their lived experiences while identifying the ideologies and beliefs that are shaped by their experiences, and contextualizing these narratives within societies women live in. For example, the life narratives of Latina college students in the U.S. not only speak about their individual experiences, but also contextualize Latinas' identities and experiences as ethnic minorities (Delgado Bernal, 2006). In this regard, Holling asserted that via life narratives, Latinas'

voices underscore their strength and tenacity in challenging forms of their experienced social and institutional oppressions as inhibiting their growth. Latinas' life narratives provide a firsthand view not only into how they maintain their own gender and ethnic identity in a predominately white society, but also how they construct and re-define their gender and ethnic selves in relation to their environment.

Intellectual and experiential knowledge is a source of strength and power transmitted via stories, family anecdotes, biographies, and life narratives. Oppressed groups have always known that learning about, preserving their stories and traditions and transmitting them is essential to their own survival and liberation. It is only when Latina women name their own experiences, give voice to their own world, and affirm themselves as legitimate social agents that they transform the meaning of those experiences (Holling, 2006). This approach challenges educational norms and moves away from traditional cultural deficit (2) and assimilation frameworks that attempt to interpret the experiences of Latinas based on the experiences of males or White women.

Women and gender oppression in Argentina

During the last decades of the XX century, historians began to pay attention to different social issues that brought to light women' life experiences, evidencing the secondary status that women were assigned in Argentinean society (Barrancos, 2008). This fact brought to light the reality that gender oppression is systematic and systemic, extends well beyond nations' borders, and it is the main reason why justice and equality historically evade women just because of their gender. Women in Argentina have been historically subjected to oppressive discourses and social norms that have systematically silenced and discounted them from political and social participation, obstructing their equal treatment under the law. Women were mentally and physically abused by military dictatorships, "disappeared" because of their political interests and participation, left aside from fundamental decision-making processes, pushed and kept in lower social strata due to neoliberal economic practices, and denied equal rights just because of their gender.

Some historically and socially accepted ideas that have justified women's unequal treatment in society (always considered less than heterosexual males) have not (only) been the result of military dictatorships (although dictatorships have helped solidify women's secondary role in society) but they have existed for centuries, woven in the very fiber of the civil society, and ferociously rooted in dominant social values. In Argentinean culture, misogyny is directly related to the values of "*Marianismo*"(3), primarily instilled by colonization and Catholicism, which appreciate women only when they are heterosexual, submissive, and abnegated mothers. Those accepted and expected gender roles for women are imposed and normalized through television programming, ads, commercials, laws, songs, family's advice, tango lyrics. As in the lines of one of Joan Manuel Serrat's songs, these expected gender roles are internalized daily "with warm breast milk and in every lullaby" (4).

In Argentina, women's oppression and subjugation to unequal and diminishing laws are centuries old and continue to be alive and kicking: They have existed not only when the country was under military dictatorships but also during democratic times. It is important to note that there is no intention here to equal military dictatorships and their flagrant violations of human rights with the rule of law including constitutional rights of democracy, but to highlight that dictatorship rule took to an extreme the misogynistic violence already existing within Argentina's society.

During the last military dictatorship, women were inflicted "broader repertoires of suplice, with broader alternatives for suffering" (Barrancos, 2008, pp. 145-146). Keeping women subjected to strict subjugating gender roles was expected and furthered not only by the military power but also by the very same groups that were opposed to such power (Lewin & Wornat, 2014). Dr. Dora Barrancos, a renowned sociologist and historian, indicates that many women were part of insurgent armed groups that operated before and during the military dictatorship such as Montoneros, El Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, Revolutionary People's Army), las Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas (Peronist Armed Forces, FAP) y las Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación (Liberation Armed Forces, FAL). Often, women made up almost 50% of these organizations, but they were usually at the base positions of these groups, and rarely participated in leadership roles. Within these groups, there was no consideration of women as autonomous and equal to men (Barrancos, 2008).

Stories of beginnings

Maffía says that she is invested in "telling stories of origins, of starting points, of beginnings". That is why a significant portion of what she discusses is directly related to her intellectual beginnings at the University of Buenos Aires. She talks about the difficulties and risks associated with studying at the university during the last military dictatorship:

> (...) a dictatorship marks a distancing from all kinds of literature, because the intellectual shut down of the country wasn't only political, but also a cultural one. The return to democracy was a flourishing of a wide diversity of ways of thinking and producing knowledge that was already happening underground. At the university we read anything that came into our hands, however possible, because analytical philosophy was prohibited, censored, together with Marxism, because those two were considered the starting points of political and social subversion and terrorism. They were considered the two main philosophical sources of terrorism because they went against the 'natural order' of things. I discovered SADAF half way into my studies at the university, and it was a clandestine organization. We had to hide in order to meet, and SADAF formed part of something called 'the university of the catacombs', because we learned about and produced knowledge that went against the 'official' education at the university. At the same time, I was increasingly reading more and more material on feminism related to social philosophy, and at some point I got my hands onto writings about feminist ethics and feminist epistemology. These learnings allowed me to use feminism as a way to critique science, the making of it, and what happened to women in science.

Maffía talks about how she worked and thought in almost total isolation most of the time while she studied at the University of Buenos Aires, without the possibility of having open intellectual discussions and, therefore, being unable to validate her theoretical points of view on feminism and knowledge production.

To me, one of the most important times in my life was when I had the ability to put together philosophy –which is my academic background- with my feminism –which is my political position. This happened in parallel, but not together. I, just one person, was studying philosophy and had this feminist investment in equal rights, but this investment was never used to criticize my theoretical education. For example, I never saw a woman philosopher in my five years at the university, and of course feminist theory was not included among the contemporary philosophical theories that we studied. Even though I read feminist theory in the eighties, that theory was never academically valued.

Life stories create meaning "backwards"

Maffía affirms that the meanings of previous actions are produced "backwards", from the present times to the past. She indicates that we recover portions of our lives, events, and decisions and re-signify them in such a way to make them "fit" the most current way in which we understand our life stories. For Maffía, the visit that María Lugones –a renow-ned Argentinean feminist that was forced to emigrate to the U.S. during last Argentinean dictatorship- paid to Buenos Aires in 1985, was crucial in bringing together her two passions: Analytic philosophy and feminist thought.

María Lugones traveled to Buenos Aires to give a job talk for a position in Ethics at the University of Buenos Aires, right after the country returned to democracy. She talked about lesbian ethics, and the search committee was in disbelief. It was quite a commotion, for a country that was coming out of a dictatorship, and María Lugones was coming from living in the U.S.A. for 20 years, where in any university you could say "I am a lesbian anarchist" and nobody would have a problem with it ... but here, doing so was a weird thing. But since she came from an analytical background, she requested to give a talk at the Argentinean Society of Analytical Philosophy (Sociedad Argentina de Análisis Filosófico, SADAF). And her talk's title was "Philosophical Feminism". And that was the first time that I saw both words together in one sentence. Moreover, that I saw that feminism was used as a critique to philosophy. Therefore, SADAF was the first place in Argentina where a lecture on feminist philosophy was presented. SADAF received with open arms such theoretical development much earlier than any university in Argentina ... actually, this took place in SADAF ten years earlier than at any other university.

This was Maffía's first encounter with the possibility of bringing together two important areas of thought, philosophy and feminism, and SADAF was the first place where seminars and conferences on the issues were held in Argentina. She was already a feminist and a philosopher, but the exposure to a new way of thinking validated Maffía's ongoing questioning of the patriarchal production of knowledge and the apparent absence of women doing so, while opening a wide array of theoretical and practical possibilities for her. María Lugones' talk on philosophical feminism re-signified Maffía's constant interest in philosophy and in feminism, and the possibility to use feminism as a tool to criticize malecentered production of knowledge.

Maffía's exposure to María Lugones' presentation also made evident the need to generate ideas collectively and putting them to work. The year after Dr. Lugones visited Argentina and with her support, Maffía gathered a wide range of feminist intellectuals and organized an international conference on feminist philosophy in Argentina. It is at this point when Maffía, initially on her own but later together with other Latin American and European feminists, started working collectively on critical and feminist epistemologies.

Women and the generation of knowledge

For Maffía, as a philosopher and as a feminist, being able to have access to intellectual work on ethics and philosophical feminism while studying at the university of Buenos Aires was a game changer. It allowed her to pay close attention and analyze the reasons why there was such a dearth of women making science and producing scientific theory in Argentina. It also fostered her questioning about what such an absence meant for Argentinean society. Finding an innovative space that facilitated not only the freedom to openly think, but also the possibility to discuss her findings with other colleagues was vital in her intellectual development:

[...] such thinking about the creation of knowledge, such feminist method of doubting it all, such critical aspect of feminism. Why were we, women, separated from the production of knowledge? Why there were such few women doing science? Why were there all kinds of arguments against women doing science? Thus, I began to get invested in all of these issues when I was able to put feminism together with a philosophical perspective.

Such questioning throws Maffía into a process of analysis where she takes a look at those spaces in society that women occupy. She also goes through a process of producing spaces for participation for herself and other women, for generation of knowledge and collaboration, spaces where women's realities could be known, analyzed, improved, and changed. She says:

I had a clear indication that we [women] could not stay at home any longer, that we were in need of political initiative to be part of the public sphere, to be represented in public spaces in society.

Maffía identifies a real and urgent need to create social and intellectual spaces for meeting other women and producing feminist theory, and springs into action. During the eighties and together with its creator Dr. Lea Fletcher, an U.S. feminist visiting Argentina, Maffía works in the publication and diffusion of *Feminaria*, a feminist journal in Spanish that included articles on feminist theory from different countries (especially Germany, Italy, France and the United States). These articles were woven together with the work of other women in Latin America: Feminist humor, feminist art, and a section on media critique related to the portrayal of women. This was a theoretical journal which was systematic, persistent, and that was published for twenty years in a row (1988 to 2008). *Feminaria* generated a space for the exchanging of ideas and collaboration among feminist thinkers around the world.

Creating spaces for women's participation

At the same time that Maffía describes her trajectory, she denounces the lack of real and relevant spaces in society where women can participate. Such lack of appropriate spaces for knowledge production and social and political participation happens not just because: It actually responds to a purposeful social, historical and political decision to consider women less valuable, less intelligent, less capable than men and therefore make them unequal participants in society's public arenas. In her beginnings working in feminist theory, Maffía goes beyond the one-dimensional critique about gender oppression to which women are subjected, and together with Spanish feminist philosopher and essayist Celia Amorós (5) takes upon an analysis of the patriarchal system from an intersectional perspective. This analysis centers not only on gender, but also class, race, and gender identity, moving beyond, as she says, "the sexist aspects of "white, European rationality". Maffía proposes, starting from direct social action, to the full insertion of women in the realm of labor, politics, and justice in her country. She also recommends the creation and diffusion of feminist ideas and the generation of interdisciplinary gatherings for the study of gender that may take diverse forms (conferences, retreats, etc.) at a national and international level, the full participation of women at the university level, and the design of majors and degrees related to women, gender, and sexuality studies.

To conclude

Maffía's testimony is about her personal life story and about how her doing is of foundational importance -in collaboration with others- in the advancement of women and gender equity in Argentinean society. She subverts patriarchal structures to generate social change and further gender inclusivity. Life stories not only structure individuals' identities and preserve communities' memories, but they also make possible for the realities that women inhabit to be known, recognized, and valued. These stories are critical elements that facilitate the transformation of the conditions under which women live and therefore change the very structure of societies. Women's testimonies are not merely stories: They are of significant relevance since they reinvent, rename, structure, and remake not only personal but also collective identities. *Heroines* are like the air we breathe: They are everywhere and have always been there, but most often than not they go un-acknowledged. It is the everyday heroines' stories that make them visible, and such visibility brings them acknowledgement, recognition, and agency as doers and change producers.

Thus, life stories assist in modifying the narrow definition of what heroism is. The need for reformulation of the heroine paradigm calls not only for new narratives that highlight the diverse and always-present role of women in the making of society, but also for changing patriarchal gender roles that define heroism in a limited, white, straight male-centered fashion.

Notes

 In this paper "Patriarchy" is understood as a social and cultural system that is malecentered and male-identified, where what is normal, good, and expected is associated with male characteristics. In patriarchal societies, human experience equates to male experience.
"Cultural deficit" is the belief that individuals from non-dominant groups (non-White) lack the ability to achieve because of their cultural background.

3. "*Marianismo*" According to Gil & Inoa Vázquez (1996), *Marianismo* is about "sacred duty, self-sacrifice, and chastity: about dispensing care and pleasure not receiving them, living in the shadows, literally and figuratively, of your men, father, boyfriend, husband, son, your kids and your family" (Gil & Inoa Vázquez, 1996, p. 7). These authors stated that "*Marianismo* is a lose-lose situation because women live in a world that perpetuates a value system where perfection is equated to submission and where these gender role expectations are revered among the Latino families and their communities". Today, women's self-denial is not only the norm but also an expectation in order to live peacefully in many families. *Marianismo* perpetuates an impossible value system for women where perfection is equated to submission and women have duties. *Machismo* means that a man's place is *en el mundo* (in the world), and a woman's place is *en la casa* (at home). 4. Esos Locos Bajitos Lyrics. (n.d.). *Lyrics.com*. Retrieved April 27, 2019, from https:// www.lyrics.com/lyric/4060114/Joan+Manuel+Serrat.

5. Amorós Puente, Celia (1944-). Filósofa, escritora y ensayista española, teórica del feminismo y figura clave del "feminismo de igualdad".

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Resumen: Las sociedades se estructuran de acuerdo a las historias que se narran de ellas. Las historias de vida de las mujeres son fundamentales para toda sociedad desde el momento en que sus narrativas reflejan cambios y reinventan historias tanto personales como colectivas. Este manuscrito se centra en la historia de vida de la Dra. Diana Maffía, quien entre otras mujeres notables Argentinas ha hecho una labor constante y necesaria, solidificando el trabajo en el área de género y la perspectiva feminista desde comienzos de los años '80. Su testimonio ofrece una perspectiva desde donde entender cómo las mujeres ven, actúan y reformulan los roles de género. Se examina aquí su testimonio, experiencia vivida durante la última dictadura militar en Argentina, historia como estudiante de filosofía en la Universidad de Buenos Aires, interés en el feminismo, y capacidad para aunar dos pasiones que le permitieron hacer un trabajo constante y sostenido junto a otras feministas para instalar el concepto de género en su sociedad. El testimonio de la Dra. Maffía ilumina la labor que heroínas desconocidas han hecho y hacen a diario, dejando en claro que las mujeres han estado siempre a la vanguardia de la creación y el sostenimiento del cambio social.

Palabras clave: mujeres - trayectoria de la heroína - feminismo - historia de vida - Argentina - género - activismo - cambio social - producción de conocimiento - feminismo filosófico - dictadura - opresión de género.

Resumo: Sociedades são estruturadas de acordo com as histórias que são contadas sobre elas. As histórias de vida das mulheres são fundamentais para toda as comunidades, a partir do momento em que suas narrações refletem mudanças e reinventam histórias pessoais e coletivas.

Este manuscrito enfoca a história de vida da Dra. Diana Maffia, que entre outras mulheres argentinas notáveis, realizou uma labor constante e necessária, solidificando o trabalho na área de gênero e perspectiva feminista desde o início dos anos 80. O testemunho oferece uma perspectiva a partir da qual entende-se como as mulheres vêem, atuam e reformulam os papéis de gênero. Neste artigo é examinado, particularmente, a experiência de Maffia durante a última ditadura militar na Argentina, sua história como estudante de filosofia na Universidade de Buenos Aires, seu interesse pelo feminismo e sua capacidade de combinar duas paixões que lhe permitiram fazer um trabalho constante e sustentado juntamente à outras feministas para instalar o conceito de gênero em sua sociedade. A narrativa da Dra. Maffia ilustra o trabalho que heroínas desconhecidas fizeram e fazem todos os dias, deixando claro que as mulheres sempre estiveram na vanguarda da criação e sustentação da mudança social.

Palavras chave: Mulheres - jornada da heroína - feminismo - história de vida - Argentina - gênero - ativismo - mudança social - produção de conhecimento - feminismo filosófico - ditadura - opressão de gênero

[Las traducciones de los abstracts fueron supervisadas por el autor de cada artículo]