

Reading Identity and Self-Help Texts

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In this article, we are interested in highlighting the reader as an individual with a history, one who constructs a series of ideas about the world and about him/herself, in the same way they construct the sum total of their experiences with literacy, as well as the notions that sustain in large part their motives for reading certain texts and their stance when reading these texts. As we individualize the reader, in reality we are seeking their identity. Now then, this notion is more than a simple theoretical category that defines the individual as a person; it is the result of a personal history that emerges from social interaction (McCarthy, 2001; McCarthy, 2002), something which Carrithers (1995) refers to as mutualism; i.e., interrelationships among people. Sarup (cited in McCarthy and Birr, 2002) defines it as a construction, the consequence of interaction among people, institutions and practices. Bakhtin (1981) suggests that this identity comes about through our internal dialogues that are, in turn, the product of multiple voices we have encountered in our past and that allow us to construct and reconstruct the meaning of many of the passages in our personal history.

Undoubtedly, in order to think and speak about oneself, we must use language, which is for Gee (1990) a discourse that includes forms of perceiving the world and the person within that world, a perception that coincides with voices and internal images and is composed of our acts, conceptualizations, beliefs and values.

If we are in agreement with this way of looking at identity, then we might argue that it has a social basis in which the context plays an important role. In this case what we will call reader identity involves those contexts and literacy practices that make up the reading history of the individual.

From this perspective regarding the concept of identity, there are some studies that analyze the effect that labels such as “good reader” or “bad reader” have on students during their scholastic experience (Alvermann, 2001), assuming that these labels then form part of what will be the reader’s identity. For our part, in a preliminary study, we have found that reader identity not only results from social relations, but also from the sum of events and experiences readers have accumulated in different contexts and situations in their lives, in which some reading event occurs (Peredo, 2002). We have confirmed the importance of identity with relation to the motives, conceptualizations, and values constructed about reading, which are modified in relation to life cycles and that have an influence on what we read, on the social uses assigned to the texts and on the reasons people read different texts for different purposes. The sum of our experiences with family, schooling, work, religion and other types of social institutions form the cultural base that sustains our motives for reading particular texts.

One way of approaching the study of reader identity is through personal histories in which literacy practices occur, since as human beings we can relate our histories as a form of speaking about ourselves, our world and others; that is, we can construct our personal

biography (McAdams, 1993) or at least the history of our schooling and our history as a reader. This form of self-description is part of identity. That is, the self concept is the image manifested when we speak of who we are or would like to have been (Walter, 1979, p. 399) and represents a way of thinking and talking about our experiences. We can say then, that reader identity is the product of a series of myths, values and ideas that people are always forming and that is maintained in a narrative, where reading plays a role in particular episodes in life.

In reader identity, explanations intervene about the benefits obtained by reading, and these benefits for Biggs (1991) can have either of two grand orientations, one very egocentric and the other more collective. This is to say that there are readers who believe the benefits of reading are directed towards oneself (individualistic reading), i.e., that the benefit of reading is directed towards the person carrying out the action. Others believe that the benefits respond to the interests of a social group and that reading is something that should be maintained (cultural reading), so that it is a kind of social contract. The more solitary individuals have a greater interest in individual liberty, while the community-minded are more interested in the social group.

Presumably these beliefs have a basis in the history of one's schooling, in reading experiences and in sociocultural frameworks. If it is plausible to think that the same reader can take different stances when reading different texts, it might also be that a reader is more inclined towards a certain stance precisely because it is there that his/her conceptions are based. In synthesis, it can be said that the reading history reflects values mediated by basic conceptions that form part of reader identity (Barton, 1994). Thus, it can be established that a reader's motives in choosing a text form part of their conceptions and values, and in any case that these motives respond to the anticipated benefits of what one reads. It is also clear that motives are related to the paths one takes in life, each of which has different social relationships, for example, contexts that are organized as training institutions such as the school, which teaches the use of certain types of texts and through which academic dialogue is established.

Within the family context are found families in which certain ways of interpreting reality are encouraged, ways that motivate or censor particular types of reading. Within the social fabric, there are also those who recommend the reading of certain types of books, such as for example, books designated as "self-help," that are well-received in certain sectors by young people. In fact, there is an important difference between those motives imposed by institutions--the reading of school textbooks, the religious text, work-related documents--and intrinsic motives that are more in line with subjectivity and the reader's world of possibilities. It is precisely within this last type of motivation that we find reading whose function is spiritual. It is of note that reading has different functions and that it is possible to relate these functions to motives and contexts of use. In large part, we can establish a great division; on one hand are work-related texts, whose purpose is productive, or scholarly texts whose purpose is to learn, generally of the informative type, and on the other hand, we have literary texts, religious texts and self-help texts that are more directed towards spirituality (Peredo, 2002). In this study we are interested in the latter.

In spiritual reading we can place not only what is read for recreational purposes or for entertainment, but also reading that provides a kind of personal pleasure, such as reading that fulfills an internal necessity of the existential sort. What the reader is looking for is not information in order to satisfy some material gain, nor to be apprised of some everyday

occurrence, as from the newspaper, but rather, a kind of interior peace; perhaps young people seek to understand the world of emotionality, of love and of human relations.

In sum, social relationships, literacy experiences and the sense of oneself form part of a collection of elements that intervene in reader identity and that are probably present while reading. For this reason we are proposing the following questions: Can it be established that reader identity intervenes in the mental processes activated during reading? Is it possible to determine if the reader obtains from the text his/her own individual meaning constructed precisely from his/her base of identity?

Method

This is a case study in which verbal reporting methods were combined with the individuals' history of schooling. It was decided to study three cases in depth because of the complexity implicated by combining these methods. The intent of the verbal report is to allow us to understand how and what people think, in this case, as they read two self-help texts. This type of analysis allows us to describe and understand certain cognitive, social and affective aspects of reading. Combining mental processes with the narrative of one's life or their school history is a methodology which makes possible the identification of the origin of some thoughts and in addition, of some strategies applied by the reader.

We chose three women students of different ages: Diana¹ is a graduate student, Tania an undergraduate and Claudia, a student from the secondary level. We believe that by contrasting ages we would be in a better position to identify differences according to the life cycle.

The field work was divided into two moments, in the first of which only Diana was studied. It was Diana who provided the two self-help texts taken as a basis for the other two readers. This type of text generally deals with the improvement of social relationships and self-esteem. There were 8 work sessions of approximately one hour each.

The procedure consisted of requesting each participant to read two self-help texts, one a narrative of the literary type and the other a type of argumentative text for scientific circulation. The texts used were:

- 1) Grad, M. (1998/2001). *La princesa que creía en los cuentos de hadas* (The princess that believed in fairy tales). 24ava ed. Buenos Aires: Obelisco, pp. 5-10.
- 2) Satir, V. (1993). *En contacto íntimo. Cómo relacionarse con uno mismo y con los demás*. (In intimate contact. How to relate to oneself and to others). Mexico: Arbol, pp. 21-24.

The first is a story, and for this reason, has a narrative structure and literary language. It appears to be dedicated to an audience of children but in reality it's a self-help text for young people. In addition, it is of note that in three years, 24 reprintings have been published, something which scientific or other types of literary books rarely achieve. The second text is one of scientific circulation whose nature is psychological and whose central theme is self-esteem.

Each session was divided into two parts: the first consisted in a verbal report of thinking processes while reading. Participants were asked to verbalize each thought presenting itself to them both while they were reading and after they had finished reading. The second part of the session was a thematic interview done by education level and through

¹ The names are fictitious.

which was constructed part of the reading history. The interpretation of data was carried out through the decomposition of the discourse and through the analysis of protocols.

Results

Diana

Diana is a young woman slightly over 30 years of age. Her family consists of the mother, who studied up to the third grade of primary school and the father, who had no schooling but was literate and who zealously took care of six daughters. Diana related her school history in which she described herself in general as a good student and as a solitary person, principally because her father restricted her social relationships. Her conceptions about reading fundamentally are centered in a utilitarian function, that is, that texts are only useful if they can be applied to the content of daily life, in work-related functions or at school. However, incorporated within this same function are also spiritual texts, especially self-help texts, because they are assigned a specific usefulness. A clear distinction is established between the two types of text and their corresponding utility; the applicability of the academic text containing new knowledge which serves for carrying out work-related duties and the utility of experiential knowledge that is found in self-help texts serving to enhance one's spirit.

The analysis of her history allows us to say that in the first self-help text (a narrative), Diana is searching for the norm in social or familial behavior resulting in a conversion of the narrative structure into a prescriptive text, that is, into a text that is written based on dictated norms, laws or procedures. She seeks experiences in order to know how to apply certain rules in her social life so that the utility of the text orients towards a social contract, based on achieving harmony in human relationships. In fact, this is the function of self-help books. This search is confirmed by her reading of the academic text, and her thinking is regulated preferentially by the terms which for her bring truth to the content of the text. It is interesting to show that in effect, there is a mental process tied to identity, observed in both readings and that has a basis in her personal history. The connections (Hartman, 1994) that Diana makes are related to familiar passages or experiences. However, there is a subtle but important difference and that has to do with the structure and social use of the texts. In the narrative text, where social use is less recognized as "scientific truth" Diana makes a series of connections between the text and some biographical milestones. On the other hand, when reading an academic text with the status of scientific authority, Diana makes statements in agreement with the author. If we see some segments of the report, we can appreciate her thinking:

I feel that my parents were too possessive because they love us so much that at times they tie us down too much. At least, sometimes they explained to us what they were doing in order to take care of us so that we wouldn't learn negative things...the problem was that my dad felt that most little children were in the street a lot, and he didn't want us to be led astray...it was a way of protecting us from the external world. Also, when the newspaper would arrive he took everything and only gave us the comics, because he said they were at our level. And sometimes when he saw that the news wasn't very aggressive, then he would leave the newspaper at hand, but he always reviewed it first. Also, I remember that as children, he didn't let us listen to the news, that's why this book about the princess that believes in fairy tales catches my eye, because it deals with parents that kept their children in a world, like very beautiful. Do your responsibilities, comply with this real set of rules and don't stray

from this, because if you don't stray from the rules, you won't suffer the consequences. ...

I identify this as risk-taking, many people don't want to go forward, open their arms, they don't want to do anything because they are afraid to make the decision to take a risk, to come to know new things, also their feelings, there are people who always have been sad and have been hurt because life has beaten them down a lot and they are afraid to come to know something new, they are afraid to do something different and that it will be worse for them or even that they're afraid of happiness.

I identify with the people in this reading because I come from a family that has limited me in many things and even so, in many things I have taken a risk and I have done well, but I feel that I still need to take more risks....you take a risk to have beautiful things...

These limitations are not economic issues, but rather issues of interpersonal relations, because as a young girl I didn't have friends near my house, the only children I knew were my cousins and my classmates in school, and I could only speak to them there at school, because when I left school, I had to go directly to my house, and no one could call me.

On reading the more scientific text, Diana reports:

These four little rules, it's fascinating to me to read them, I love them because I am also in agreement with the author that we use four essential points of our personality, and if a person works with them beginning with whichever of the four, a change comes about, it's immediately going to modify the others, and for this reason it's a modification within the personality of this individual..people seek equilibrium..we are always in equilibrium, more or less..although perhaps this equilibrium is negative...a change always suggests fear because it's something unknown.

Now we will compare Diana with the other two readers using these same texts.

Tania

Tania is a young 18 year old girl. Her father is a commercial professional and her mother is a homemaker. She describes herself as a hyperactive but lazy person. The family setting is not conducive to reading, her father is accustomed only to reading furniture magazines, the field in which he works; her mother occasionally reads religious texts. Tania states that she is a very poor reader and that the little she has read is of poor quality. She states that her father criticizes her for what she reads.

Tania's school history is not favorable either for developing a love of reading. Her first experiences were coercive and traumatic so that we can confirm the importance that school labels have on the performance of readers. Generally, people enjoy those tasks in which they are successful, but we are unlikely to be motivated to carry out activities at which we have a habit of failing. This might be so in Tania's case, as we can see in the following segments of her school history:

I was very afraid in primary school because there was a teacher who scolded us a lot, and she made us go one by one to her little room to read. It was like her office and then we were all terrified and shaking when we had to read, and I was very afraid. If you made a mistake, she scolded you, and she was one of those old nuns who pulled your ears or pinched you.

From these experiences, she constructed some ideas about reading. She states that people who are accustomed to reading literature, do so because they don't do anything useful. By this she is trying to say that reading as entertainment is not very productive. She contrasts this type of reading with what she calls reading that can be "applied," which allows us to learn things about real life. It is precisely the kind of reading people do who "read a lot but are not interested in novels." This function of reading is undoubtedly utilitarian. Furthermore, we can observe that self-help books are within this notion of "utility" because they help establish a social contract, but the literary recreational text is not within this category, and so is not useful.

Tania read the narrative text silently and expressed the feelings that she was imagining during the episodes:

I imagined the princess sitting on her mother's lap. Her mama was telling her stories about typical princes, then she dreamed about her prince...it didn't matter that her mother came in, her mother scolded her because she was dancing improperly, she should learn to dance correctly and then she sat on her mother's lap, she forgot that they had scolded her, as if it's not right to think about bad things that happen to us but to go on. On the other hand, you have to wait (for the prince), everything happens in good time. I think the blue prince does exist, when you fall in love.

The emotions seen there are: happiness which, according to the girl, occurs when the prince arrives. For me, happiness is something that you like, that you enjoy, a mood. Frustration is seen when the mother scolds her because she is dancing. In real life, when you do things and somebody says they are bad, I think that is frustrating, like your parents, society.

Tranquility: when she sat down to listen to her mama, she became tranquil. If something happens, I tell my mama about it and even if it keeps happening, I feel tranquil because I have told my mama.

On reading the second text, which was a text used for scientific circulation, Tania reported her thoughts almost at once when she finished reading. She elaborated on the following interpretations and connections:

I recalled that they had told me in class that we are so accustomed..like to the routine that we don't see the reality of the meaning of things and we don't do anything more because if so it has to...it was saying that in order to feel alive, or something like that, like we have to feel respected, accepted loved ones and if not, we are not comfortable.

I think the ideal would be to be comfortable with ourselves, but we always let ourselves be taken in, like if something is like so, we have to do it like so. It shouldn't be like that, but even so, I fall into that trap and everyone does it like that. The author says that we should be more coherent with ourselves, to please ourselves, not others, each one should love him/herself in order for you to be able to love more. It would be enough for each of us to love him/herself, even if others don't love us because if not, you aren't going to be happy.

I think that if you don't love yourself, others won't love you because if I love myself, other people love me.

Without a doubt, the meanings Tania constructs, in this reading, are different from those of Diana. Tania appears more concerned about defending her self-esteem, based on what she read, while Diana appears more attached to the text and less concerned about herself as a person.

Claudia

Claudia is a fourteen year old adolescent. She is the second of four girls in a family where both parents have basic schooling and are employed, the father as a businessman and the mother as a housekeeper. Claudia has contact with some aunts who, like her, are young students and who have instilled in her the value of formal education as a means of self-improvement. This seems to be a goal Claudia would like to achieve, that is, it underlies for her the idea of progress and social mobility. Despite being a very beautiful girl, she still is not vain like women are, as she does not use make-up, but she does have manifestations appropriate for her age, like being interested in celebrities and musical groups of the moment, which have turned into symbols and patterns for behavior. She defines herself as studious.

Her ideas about reading are, on the one hand, linked to school as she states that books serve to learn, while on the other hand, her ideas are linked to her fondness for celebrities, since she states that books also serve for knowing about, "what others do in their lives, the lives of people."

Claudia elaborated upon a series of connections and meanings after reading the narrative text:

I imagine a very delicate queen with golden hair as all girls, she believed in fairy tales..and in eternal happiness I think that she must have a lot of happiness since she believes a lot...she believed a lot in magic..she remembered her infancy a lot..She believed in fairy tales because when she dreamed she imagined...that a prince was going to come to her... . The queen described how it was going to be, just as she had dreamed... . The dream ended happily like all fairy tales...she was now old enough to choose the perfect husband..she was old enough to appreciate a gift so special that had been passed down from mothers to daughters

This reading helps you make decisions about who you will marry, or have a relationship with..The reading talks about the little princess's imagining that was based upon the box they had given her..seeing the two statues she imagined herself together with her friend...I imagine myself with my doll, my daughter...that she is my daughter and I love her a lot... . Interior beauty is more important, not the physical..but men focus more on the physical because that's how they imagine their wives..I imagine my future as though I become someone hardworking, studying, I am concerned about my own self-improvement.

With regard to the text used for scientific circulation, her thoughts are primarily literal repetitions:

I don't know how to explain it, but I do understand it. I think that people think they shouldn't express their feelings. The sad thing is, most people don't think about their feelings...they only think it's emotional dishonesty and they don't think about other people. It also refers to taking risks in something that you haven't done, or that you have done in a different way...

The analysis of the three cases shows two fundamental issues: the conceptions and the thoughts that are derived from reading two texts. The conceptions about reading are similar in some aspects between Diana and Tania while they contrast in others, as is shown in Table 1. For Diana as well as for Tania the underlying vision of reading is utilitarian. In a subtle way Claudia coincides with them because for her reading is about acquiring knowledge that in some way is useful. The first two girls coincide in that reading about history or religion serves no purpose. This finding is very interesting since if self-help books are a form of

control of social behavior, just as religious books, they also have the possibility of serving the same function. Now then, for Tania as well as for Claudia reading produces dialogue, except that for Tania it's remote because she doesn't live with people who read "much." On the other hand, Diana utilizes it as a foundation for the relationships kept from her by her family environment. The metaphors that Diana uses are suggestive of her identity: reading revolutionizes my thinking, it's like a motor that activates her mind. When put together with where she says that readers of school textbooks are green, that is, immature, these comments indicate that she is trying to say that the texts she reads are different from school books, and these are the ones she prefers: " I like reading for knowledge that can be applied, better than reading for entertainment.. I like to read and make comments with an expert about what I read because it enriches you and it gives you security... now you can express it." In sum, Diana seems to discern types of reading and levels of maturity for reading. Particularly for her, reading activates the intellect.

Table 1: Conceptions about Reading

DIANA	TANIA	CLAUDIA
<p>Reading opens doors to knowledge, to dialogue and to social relationships. Prayer books and prayers don't serve any purpose. History doesn't have any usefulness. Reading "revolutionizes" my thinking. Reading is a form of interaction with the writer. The author has a certain intention, but not everyone understands it the same way. (Only) readers of school texts are "green."</p>	<p>Reading serves for general culture, practical usefulness and for amusement. There is a difference between work-related reading and "refined" reading. People that work don't have time to read (like Dad and I). Novels and the lives of the saints don't serve any purpose (mama reads books about saints). Reading produces dialogue (but I put myself with people who don't read) There is reading for romantic people, but they are sort of tragic. Reading about history is general culture, but it serves no purpose. Reading that is useful is reading that applies to life.</p>	<p>People have to have experience in order to be able to read a book and talk about it. Reading is learning.</p>

In Tania we observe a clear manifestation of her identity as she differentiates between refined reading and the reading she does because she is unrefined (remember that she said she reads things of poor quality). The reading that her father does is useful, in contrast to what her mother does, indicating that her father's reading is productive and work-related;

while spiritual (religious) reading doesn't produce any benefit. Finally, we can see that Claudia has a conception strictly attached to school.

Table 2: Thoughts on the Narrative Text

DIANA	TANIA	CLAUDIA
Princes don't exist. Parents don't prepare their daughters for being real-life partners. Adults restrain the expression of feelings.	You have to know how to wait for a prince. Everything will happen in good time. The prince is the man whom you will fall in love with.	The text helps you to make decisions about choosing a partner. Interior beauty is the most important.
EMOTIONS	EMOTIONS	EMOTIONS
Dreaming is not useful. The parents' deception and lies to their children. Repression of adults.	Happiness is something you enjoy, it's a mood. Frustration caused by sanctions from parents and society. The mother's trust and protection.	Happiness is believing in fantasy The hope that one day a prince will come. The hope of achieving personal goals.

Table 3: Thoughts on the text used for scientific circulation

DIANA	TANIA	CLAUDIA
Emotional frankness is socially sanctioned; low self-esteem produces fear. People don't take risks because of fear. There are rules for seeking equilibrium but people are afraid to express their feelings and take risks, so that many behaviors are imitated and done without knowledge of the consequences.	Routine prevents us from seeing the meaning of things. It doesn't matter what everyone else thinks. It's necessary to be satisfied with oneself. Self-esteem is what is most important in order to be happy.	Getting angry is taking a risk with mama, with friends. To take a risk of losing them. Getting angry is risking communication with the ones you love. You take a risk that they will let you talk. It's sad that people don't think about the feelings of others.

Discussion and Conclusions

It has been demonstrated that the same text, in this case two texts that were given to the participants, are read and interpreted in different ways, at least when the readers are recalling their thoughts. One important basis for reflection is the chronological age corresponding to a certain stage in life, which has an influence on one's identity. For McAdams (1993) it is precisely in adolescence that one begins to become more conscious of him/herself, of their autonomy as people with individual characteristics. In addition we ask ourselves, "Who are we?" This is probably where the biographical myth begins to develop.

Each one of the three readers studied interacted in life with other people who left with them dialogues, memories and passages from life which were told in detail during the interviews and that produce certain connections when interpreting text content. It is possible to note that each one positions herself with respect to her parents, judging them (Diana), having them as models (Tania) or being afraid of losing them (Claudia). The narrative text takes on the relationship of a woman facing matrimony in light of the parents' expectations, and from there, Diana makes the connection with parents who don't allow their children to make choices, to live. Tania makes a connection, based on her identity, that she doesn't enjoy romanticism, and she believes in destiny. Claudia, at her young age, prefers to interpret the text more in line with the literal meaning but even so, makes clear her fantasy and her attachment to her parents.

In Diana and in Tania there is a clear individualistic orientation about the benefits of reading (Biggs, 1991) since they are taking on a self-directed benefit from the moment they begin to search for the usefulness of texts. Despite the fact that because these are self-help texts they might be thought to maintain a social and psychological basis in human relations, in reality, these two young women are seeking a practical aim for reading.

Finally, even though we only studied three women, we believe the results allow for the beginning of a new strand of questions about the motives a reader has for reading particular texts and the motives that move young people to seek written information. Additionally, we intend to continue studying this type of self-help texts, for example, by comparing results with respect to gender. This is to say, we would like to determine if there is an important difference in reading between men and women; above all, the assumption that this type of literary genre is more common among women, although what causes this difference is not clear. It is most commonly held that this difference is due to the social and cultural role that men and women still have assigned to them, although it would be convenient to gather some empirical evidence demonstrating whether or not in effect, this is strictly a cultural issue, or if other biographical elements are intervening.

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