Reflective Activity as a Promoter of Awareness Processes in College Students: A Study

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As the literature clearly shows, supporting the development of reflective awareness skills is undoubtedly an important element in learning processes. In psychology, multiple theoretical approaches and research work have delved into the study of what is termed implicit knowledge. In particular, the relationship between human activity (in terms of actions, thoughts, beliefs, motivation, and reasoning) and different levels of awareness is a relevant subject of analysis that we consider as the core of this paper. In order to deepen our understanding of the concepts of awareness and reflexive activity, we refer to Pierre Vermersch's psycho-phenomenological approach and Piaget's theory of cognitive awareness. In this paper, we aim to show the use of the reflective approach centered on the elicitation of specific lived experiences. The objective is to promote in students a process of awareness of their activity and their role within the university context. Two students case studies from the University of Salerno took part in the research. The method used was based on narrative interviews that makes use of some techniques and principles of elicitation interviews, a conversational approach that supports the participant in focusing and describing a specific experience. The interviewer guides subjects, without induction, through the transition from the implicit of lived experience (particularly action) to the explicit of reflected awareness of that action. The data collected show how reflective activity by means of guided evocations of lived experiences helped participants become aware of how some distortions and irrational thoughts (related to the self and context) negatively affected them during the activities. The reflective work fostered by the elicitation of experiences often allows for enhanced self-awareness; the subject takes ownership of the action, analyzes it, and understands the difficulties.

Keywords: awareness, difficulties, grasp of consciousness, reflexivity, university student

INTRODUCTION

This work is part of an international collaboration, of which the main objective is to support in students a process of awareness specifically focused on their past and present educational practices, starting from the narration of specific experiences (Bruner, 1986, 1995). In this paper, educational practices are "elicited" using an interview based on techniques and principles of the psycho-phenomenological approach (Vermersch, 2012). The psycho-phenomenological perspective is based on a conversational approach defined by elicitation interviews (Vermersch, 1994, 2000a,b, 2015) and centered on the reconstruction by the participants of the lived experience. This technique intended to support students' learning though the awareness of their past unsuccessful experiences. In this sense, the narrative flow aims for a reflective return. In psychology, the importance of narrative is already well established; it constitutes an indispensable activity for understanding reality and reflecting on it (Bruner, 1990; Smorti, 2018). Bruner (2002) in seminal empirical and theoretical works has shown how in biographical narrative, the canonical and the possible are in a kind of perpetual dialectical tension in which the primary purpose would seem to be to maintain a balance between *the past* and *the possible*. The narrative is a fundamental resource for the construction of individual and collective identity; it is all the activity through which we construct meaning and make sense of our story (Bruner, 2002). The narrative is a communicative act; it opens to the relationship with *the Other*, in a dimension that goes from the individual to the social; in which the memory is externalized and, in the narrative act, becomes the object of reflection and awareness to then return to be internalized in a new form (Savarese et al., 2013; Marsico, 2017; Iannaccone et al., 2018; Smorti, 2018). As part of the broader narrative approach, this article highlights the importance of reconstructing in detail the processes that led the student into situations of learning difficulty. It aims to show the use of the reflective approach centered on the elicitation of specific lived learning experiences. Eliciting the experiences can encourage students to reflect on their activities, their skills, and their role as students, the aim being to analyze and modify those actions that emerge from the narrative (and are evaluated by them) as ineffective and/or insufficient. The elicitation method is based on psychological interviewing that, through certain techniques of formulation (questions, rephrasing, and silences; see examples provided in the cases discussed below), supports the interviewee in focusing on and describing a specific experience (Vermersch, 2007a). The area of verbalization is the "action" considered as a valuable source of information. Action that can be defined by the elicitation approach as the actualization of the task accomplishment. Knowing how a task is performed (in a given situation and context) allows the student to better understand and analyze the difficulties encountered in learning, the possible causes of mistakes and dysfunctions, the reasons that seem to determine its success, any distortions. An elicitation interview is a non-inductive technique that supports people in the process of becoming aware. Recent studies have used specific narrative elicitation methods (Soroko, 2019; Naldemirci et al., 2020).

Soroko's (2019) study drew on self-narrative elicitation methods, which are based on a type of in-depth psychological interview in which the subject's self-reflection appears. These approaches consist of a narrative stimulus (elicit self-narrative instruction, verbal stimulus, and visual stimulus) that helps the person produce an open narrative statement about their biography and structure experiences narratively (Soroko, 2019). Narrative elicitation has been used in an internal medicine department specializing in cardiology in a Swedish hospital (Naldemirci et al., 2020); this study focused on narrative elicitation observations conducted with nurses. Naldemirci et al. (2020) stated that narrative elicitation involves skills and strategies practiced especially in person-centered care that can help patients articulate goals that are meaningful and important to themselves. These skills and strategies are preparing for narrative elicitation, dwelling in the patient's narrative, and constructing and co-constructing the narrative. In a previous study (Savarese et al., 2019b), the psycho-phenomenological approach of counseling intervention carried out through the method of an elicitation interview was presented and discussed. The analysis showed how the reflexive activity, promoted by the elicitation of the experience, mitigated in the student, involved reactions full of anxiety and promoted a positive change in the perception of the Self in the situation narrated.

In this paper, we try to show how the reflective process can effectively support, in university students, a process of awareness of their own actions and skills, helping them to analyze and identify those distortions (of themselves in that context and in that situation) that, very often, hinder and/or block their university path.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research in the psycho-pedagogical field has shown, in recent decades, a particular interest in the role of the reflexivity and reconstruction of lived experience in learning processes. Previously, cultural–historical studies (Lurija, 1974; Tulviste, 1991; Iannaccone, 2010) shown the importance of the role of cultural frames in problem-solving activities. An understanding of how knowledge is constructed not only within institutional settings, but also in everyday life contexts has emerged from these works (in a similar way the cognitivism become aware of the ecological dimensions of psychological activity: Neisser, 1967). The knowledge acquired in everyday life is largely implicit and can be actively used as the individual becomes aware of it. However, although human activity is the result of the intertwining of cognitive, cultural, relational, and institutional dimensions (Iannaccone, 2010; Mollo, 2021), it is useful to remember how this activity remains largely opaque to consciousness. Piaget (1974) observed how individuals belonging to certain professional categories (e.g., mechanics), when faced with logical problems (typical of school), failed to solve them, while on the contrary, in their work activity, put in place a kind of formal reasoning (Anolli, 2004; Perret and Perret-Clermont, 2011). It follows that, in order to activate reflective skills on actions performed, it is necessary to make explicit the

lived experience. In other words, the activity of individuals—understood in terms of actions, thoughts, beliefs, motivations, and reasoning—is influenced by the interweaving of explicit and implicit knowledge. They are the result of latent, informal learning that occurs through experience in everyday life contexts, within certain cultural frames (Perret-Clermont, 1979; Perret and Perret-Clermont, 2011) or socially and emotionally safe thinking spaces (Bachtin, 1981; Perret-Clermont, 2001, 2004; Zittoun and Iannaccone, 2014; Coppola et al., 2015, 2019; Szulevicz et al., 2016).

Awareness, Elicitation, and Reflexivity

To set as a goal the understanding of the implicit and explicit aspects of action and, in particular, of the gap between activity and what makes the success or failure of that action possible calls into question the problem of awareness.

Within the field of developmental psychology, Piaget's (1974) theory of *grasp of consciousness* is an important landmark in understanding the relationship between behavior and consciousness (Stoltz, 2018). In his theory, Piaget (1974) had shown how *grasp of consciousness* should be considered as a construction, an elaboration of the different levels of consciousness, with the latter being understood in terms of integrated systems (and not as a whole). We must assume that action, as knowledge in action - understood both in terms of conceptualized and conscious knowledge and in terms of knowledge in action and not reflected - in order to be fully conscious (conscious knowledge) needs to be conceptualized. To do this, it is necessary to understand how action evolves toward conceptualization (Piaget, 1974). The need for *grasp of consciousness* emerges from the need to search for new means with a more active *réglage* (adaptation). It does not necessarily arise from situations of maladjustment, but rather from the pursuit of a new (conscious) objective *from which derives the observation of success or failure*. The process of becoming aware passes through stages, and the process of internalization takes place according to a progression that goes from the periphery *(P)* toward the center *(C)*. It starts from the periphery[1] (objectives, results, perceptible effects, and significant sensory data) and, in an attempt to reach the internal mechanism of action, progressively moves toward the central regions of action (recognition of the means employed and reasons for choice or their modification). Consciousness does not arise from the subject or the object, but from the interaction between the two (Piaget, 1974). In the case of failure, an understanding of the reasons that produced it leads consciousness toward the more central regions of action (purpose or overall direction); a subject starting from the observable on the object (missed result) will try to understand on which points the accommodation of the scheme to the object is lacking and will direct their attention toward the employed means. This process proceeds in stages

(from P to C) toward the internal mechanism of the act, and internalization of the action leads to a conceptualization of reality that moves from practical assimilation (empirical abstraction) to an assimilation by concepts (reflexive abstraction). *Grasp of consciousness* cannot be reduced exclusively to a process of illumination that produces no effects (or changes) other than making "visible" what was previously "obscure"; it is to be considered a construction, a conceptualization that transforms a pattern of action into a concept (Piaget, 1974). Piaget is credited with having proposed a methodology of observation using traces and classes of observables of which the application is subject to the analysis of the task and knowledge of its cognitive relationship with the subject (in terms of logical–mathematical relationships).

Vermersch (1994, 2000a,b, 2015), starting from some elements of the Piagetian theory of grasp of consciousness, arrived to establish a theoretical link between consciousness-raising and elicitation. Vermersch's model can be considered a methodologically grounded description of subjective experience. The lived experience (in term of action) is an essential source of inference for the analysis of intellectual functioning. The psycho-phenomenological approach (psychophenomenologie) focuses on describing the kind of cognitive relationship that a subject has with the matter he is talking about, which, on the phenomenological level, translates into the feeling of reliving it. Action is composed of explicit and implicit aspects; therefore, Vermersch (1994, 2000a,b, 2015), in his work, highlighted the need to help subjects develop abstraction skills based on experience and its evocation. To better understand the concept, the author proposes the metaphor of the amateur draftsman who must practice observing in order to learn to draw *what he sees* and not to draw *what he knows*. Through an elicitation interview, the individual is placed in the position of *describing themself* the nature of the difficulty they encountered or the error they made during the activity they evoked. Knowledge of the rational procedures put in place by the individual when accomplishing a task represents the focus of Vermersch's proposed technique. This methodology is a useful tool for supporting the student in becoming aware. The need to be heard drives people toward revisions and reconstructions of the stories used to tell their lives while remaining true to a set of values and beliefs that are not subject to radical revisions (Bruner, 1996; Smorti, 2018). This reflexive activity, promoted by verbalization, activates in the subject an awareness provoked by elements that the subject himself did not know he knew or was convinced he did not know (Vermersch, 1994, 2000a,b, 2015).

In this sense, narration and elicitation fit within a dialogical dimension in which the individual tries to make sense of past events and the presence of the Other (the Self or other than the Self), and this implies the modification and modulation of the communicative act (Bachtin, 1981; Bruner, 2002; Marková, 2016).

A VIEW OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NEED

Previous studies (Savarese et al., 2015, 2016, 2019a) have shown that becoming aware of one's difficulties promotes in college

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[1]The periphery can be defined as the subject's immediate and external reaction to an object, who uses it according to a goal (assimilating the object into an earlier schema) and takes note of the result obtained. The two terms (periphery and center) are conscious in every intentional action, while the schema (which assigns a goal to the action) can remain unconscious (the child reaches their goal without knowing how they proceeded) (Piaget, 1974).

students the ability to identify effective solutions. By age, the young university student is in a delicate phase of the life cycle—a particularly stressful developmental time, full of changes and critical situations, which can become a source of stress and occasionally trigger true identity disorders (Gore, 2008). The student goes through what is referred to as a transitional phase (Cassidy and Trew, 2004), in which social relationships (with family, peers, and educational figures), sometimes physical living contexts (e.g., change of city), and their identity within these are redefined (Oyserman and Destin, 2010; Tateo et al., 2018). In general, the student in difficulty experiences more or less severe forms of discomfort, capable of affecting the educational path and, more generally, life. They may experience difficulty tolerating frustration in waiting to see their goals (exams, graduation, self-actualization, and autonomy) realized. They may find themselves in situations where they experience dissatisfaction due to a series of frustrated needs that create great tension, fatigue, and sometimes disorientation; experience decision-making difficulties, tending to disperse energies that are not productively finalized (e.g., not knowing which exams to schedule and dispersing themselves in non-functional parallel activities, or scheduling too many exams at once); tend to lose confidence and self-esteem; use little of, or in a dysfunctional way, the coping strategies available to deal constructively with commitments, obstacles, and stressful situations; complain of difficulties in social–relational adjustment in the university context (related to confidence and insecurity and fears because of confrontation and competition), but also of re-adaptation in the friend and family context; present difficulties in concentration and commitment, related to a state of tension, worry, and fear of disappointing loved ones; feel the weight of family and social expectations, often experiencing a sense of emotional impotence (fear of not being recognized and loved unconditionally) and loneliness; and experience feelings of guilt and fear of not being "up to the task," questioning the course of study choice undertaken (slows, postpones, or avoids to the point of stalemate) and one's identity as a student (Marsico et al., 2015; Savarese et al., 2016, 2019b).

OBJECTIVES AND PARTICIPANTS

This study, structured on qualitative and descriptive research, assumes that the reflective activity promoted by narrative elicitation techniques supports processes of awareness in university students. A reflexive return of one's experience in order to know it (and recognize it), appropriate it, use it as a knowledge base to refine one's actions, understand difficulties and activate resilience and coping skills (Vermersch, 2004; Iannaccone and Cattaruzza, 2015; Savarese et al., 2019b). Narrative, as a dialectic between what was expected and what was, appears to be a valuable tool *not so much for solving problems, but for finding them* (Bruner, 2002). Piaget (1974) asserted that *grasp of consciousness* can occur under the pressure of the failures and obstacles that the subject may encounter when trying to pursue the goals that motivate them (Piaget, 1974; Vermersch, 2006). The research presented herein is part of a framework aimed at promoting student well-being, and the primary objective is to create the conditions that allow students to come into contact with their own experiences and become aware of them (*grasp of consciousness*).

Participants

In this paper will be presented the analysis of experiences related to two cases of students of the University of Salerno who, as a result of difficulties perceived during their studies, have turned to the University of Salerno's Needs Analysis Center (Sportello di Analisi dei Bisogni) of the "Office for the Right to Study" (Diritto allo Studio). The narratives of the experiences were elicited by an interview using the narrative and psycho-phenomenological approach (Bruner, 1986, 1995; Vermersch, 1994, 2012).

METHOD

The method involved narrative interviews (Bruner, 1986, 1995). The principles and techniques that guided the interviews[2] were inspired by elicitation interviews, a methodology that offers the opportunity to collect useful accounts of lived experience (Vermersch, 2012). The interviews were recorded with the consent of the students interviewed and were transcribed. The resulting texts were analyzed using a hermeneutic–interpretive approach to identify the significant elements of the narratives[3]. This interview type (Vermersch, 1994) represents a useful methodology for the construction and clarification of the cognitive resources and operational skills necessary for the implementation of reflective activities. This technique allows for the exploration of not only students' experiences, but also operates as a true formative activity. Reflective activity promotes consciousness-raising processes, which are the primary goal of this technique. Reflexive activity means: A "*set of cognitive acts through which the mind retraces certain situations experienced, in order to gain awareness of the patterns of intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning put in place, and to critically analyze and interpret the processes identified*" (Cesari Lusso et al., 2015). Through an elicitation interview, the student is guided toward the description (and nature) of the difficulty encountered; it becomes the object of reflection (a key element in helping to raise awareness in this regard). Guidance in verbalization builds on this *reflective return* (Vermersch, 1994).

In a more general framework of referring to the elicitation interview, the principles we selected and that guided the interview are (Cesari Lusso et al., 2015; Iannaccone et al., 2018):

1. Use of verbalization and active listening;
2. Inviting the student to describe concrete actions;
3. Inviting the student to narrate a specific situation;
4. Inviting the student to use concrete interactive dynamics and actions;
5. Helping the student reflect and promote self-awareness.

[2]The interviews were conducted by the first author, Monica Mollo, who was trained to conduct elicitation interviews in 2007 and 2008.
[3]The interviews were very long, so we present the most significant passages. The data in their entirety are available to researchers who may be interested.

The central aspect of such study is primarily to emphasize how certain forms of implicit knowledge influence and direct action, making certain aspects of it not directly accessible to consciousness (Vermersch, 1994). In our opinion, supporting the emergence of reflexive skills could represent an explanatory element of those aspects that are not entirely clear of human action by encouraging, in the subjects involved, an awareness of the way that individuals have to perceive, act, and look for reasons, meanings, and motivations of their acts (Cesari Lusso et al., 2015).

INTERVIEWS[4]

Preliminary Aspects

Before the beginning of the interview,[5] in order to create the deontological and technical conditions necessary to carry out the activity. A pre-interview was organized, where the students were informed about the nature of the meeting and the communicative contract was made explicit. In relation to the latter, the wording used during the interview was chosen according to the intended perlocutionary effect (Vermersch, 2007b). In reference to the elicitation technique, the term "*I propose to you if you agree*" was used as the initial wording, which aims to convey the message that the interviewee–interviewer relationship is symmetrical and synchronic.

First Interview

The first case analyzed concerns of a student named Francesca enrolled in the first year of her course (Master's degree in Professional Educators), who had been stuck in her studies for a year. Francesca, however, actively participated in the life of the university: She attended a workshop on the study method, performed voluntary community service at the Office for the Right to Study, and attended several training courses as a learning tutor for students with disabilities.

After the initial phase of communicative agreement, and considering that the interview aimed for complete verbalization and active listening, the student was asked to produce a narrative response to the question, "*What was your first experience with university like?*"

From the initial narrative, the student's naïve representation of the situation emerged; her insecurity emerged from the outset (turn 1):

1. Francesca: *Oh God (0.5) it's all new of course (.) then slowly I entered in the mechanism, but it was not so difficult (.) I have*

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[4]The interviews were transcribed in their entirety using a lightened version of the Jeffersonian system; in fact, only a few transcription codes were used, such as: (.) indicates a micropause; (0.5) indicates the duration of a pause expressed in tenths of a second; underlined letters or phrases indicate an expression of emphasis, the greater the underlined portion; the dot indicates the stopping point of tone (not necessarily the conclusion) (Jefferson, 1985).

[5]The interviews were conducted at the University of Salerno's Needs Analysis Center, a context already familiar to the students. The interviews took place in a silent environment without the presence of anyone other than the interviewee and the researcher. Students who took part in the research were given appointments at different times.

always done well at school. in the sense that I have always studied I liked it. the only difference was to prepare the exams in a short time (.) to organize the study to be within the time (.) then being a bit anxious the fact of going in front of the professor and remain silent (.) in silence (.) forget the information.

In this phase of the interview, the student was asked to focus on a task (exam preparation). The purpose was to accompany the student toward a particular aspect of her experiential experience, in order to collect data on the interactive dynamics implemented and to help the student to self-inform about the various dimensions of her action. It is apparent from the initial narrative how the student's fears (turns 4, 5, and 6) affected her study and conditioned her actions. In particular, in turns 8 and 9, a kind of anticipatory anxiety emerged, related to a situation that the student had created in her mind (a future scenario) and to the image of the professor. It is as if the focus of attention, during the study, shifted from the exam to oneself. The irrational thought was fixed (turns 8, 9, and 11) and so powerful as to anticipate in a negative way the event of the exam, triggering reactions of intense anxiety and physical reactions (turns 19 and 21).

2. Francesca: *I got up I had breakfast (.) and then I started taking the slides (0.5) I remember that I started reading first and then after a first reading (.) I started underlining the things that I thought were most important to remember*
3. Interviewer: was there anything that caught your attention?
4. Francesca: *I was trying to understand what I was reading then after underlining I would start repeating what I had underlined to see a little bit if I remembered (.) and if I understood what I had read*
5. Interviewer: what was going on at that time?
6. Francesca: *as soon as I started to repeat, I seemed to remember (.) then 5 or 6 minutes went by and I forgot what I had read before.*
7. Interviewer: what were you thinking about in the 5/6 minutes?
8. Francesca: *I was thinking about the difficulty of the exam at the time of the exam*
9. Francesca: *nothing (.) I was imagining being in front of the professor (.) being afraid (.) difficulty speaking to expose content*
10. Interviewer: You told me, correct me if I'm wrong, I imagine being in front of the professor asking me questions and I freeze up. Do you ever change the scenario of the thoughts that come into your mind?
11. Francesca: *No (.) I always have a fixed thought.*

Lived Experience

The researcher rephrased what the student had verbalized up to that point. The goal was to help the student develop her narrative and focus the narrative on the day of the exam, an event she experienced and did not imagine. The student began by recounting her colleagues' exams:

12. Interviewer: On the morning of the exam, did you focus on exposing and comparing yourself to them (ed. other students)?
13. *Francesca: I was afraid I was doing something wrong*
14. Interviewer: Did this happen to you for every colleague?
15. *Francesca: No (.) only some (.) for some questions*
16. Interviewer: How do you view those who responded differently?
17. *Francesca: I didn't make an evaluation of merit (.) maybe you will have had more time to prepare (.) definitely (.) better than me (.) probably*
18. Interviewer: What did this idea provoke in you?
19. *Francesca: It made me anxious*
20. Interviewer: what do you mean by anxiety?
21. *Francesca: I mean fear (.) stomach (0.5) feeling like vomiting (.) really wanting to <u>run away</u>.*

During the interview, it emerged that the emotional reaction of anxiety is social in nature; it was always linked to the (irrational) thought of possible failure in public.

The researcher rephrased what the student narrated again to allow her to focus on a specific experience (the moment of the exam) and to describe in retrospect and in detail its different components (Vermersch, 2007a):

22. Interviewer: We get to the time when you are called (ed. Professor), what happens?
23. *Francesca: I get asked the first question (.) I'm already on the ball at the first question*
24. Interviewer: can you tell me about that episode?
25. *Francesca: he asks me a question about chicken pox that I thought I knew (.) but there I get stuck*
26. Interviewer: can you tell me about this moment?
27. *Francesca: he asks me the question I just don't remember (.) I get confused with the bacteria*
28. Interviewer: what were you looking at?
29. *Francesca: the professor*
30. Interviewer: what were you seeing?
31. *Francesca: a person who didn't give me peace of mind that I don't feel comfortable with.*
32. Interviewer: what do you mean by not putting me at ease?
33. *Francesca: there is a person who looked at you with a look (.) not threatening (.) but hard stiff severe you know how to tell you (.) I know you don't know it so well I'll make you go on*
34. Interviewer: what happens to the next question?
35. *Francesca: I try to answer correctly I answer well enough. It was question and answer with no margin of explanation and then he asks me the third question I answer well the first part the second part the answer was a bit more confused*
36. Interviewer: how come?
37. *Francesca: because I knew that it didn't go well basically the exam i.e., I was aware that I didn't pass the exam*
38. Interviewer: what were your thoughts?
39. *Francesca: that I hadn't passed the exam*
40. Interviewer: how did the exam go?
41. *Francesca: I didn't pass the exam.*

In turns 33 and 37, it is possible to identify hidden implications in the student's statements related to the thought of failure (previously surfaced) and how this thought influenced the outcome of the exam.

The student, guided by the researcher, evoked another exam where anxiety (fear of judgment and public failure) emerged again. Also in this situation, the outcome of the exam was negative. In all likelihood, these experiences, related to fear of judgment, had the effect of lowering the student's self-esteem and self-efficacy:

42. Interviewer: what was going on at that time (.) give me an example
43. *Francesca: for example, the critique of judgment (.) I was confusing Kant's judgments*
44. Interviewer: what were you thinking about at that moment?
45. *Francesca: about the time that was little*
46. Interviewer: at the time so (.).
47. *Francesca: it was as if during these three exams I felt time flowing through me (.) I felt the breath on my neck.*

The non-inductive technical relaunches used by the researcher were inspired by some techniques used in elicitation interviews; in this specific case, they were used in order to facilitate the verbalization of the components of the action that usually remain implicit, such as a detailed chronology of the interaction; non-visible visible material actions (what he saw, what was said in his mind, thoughts, etc.); any judgments made about himself and the situation; and, above all, the explication of the underlying criteria (what do you mean by "."; how come?) (Vermersch, 1994; Cesari Lusso et al., 2015). Such techniques are necessary to bring out as many details as possible during narration.

First Awareness

In this stage, before the conclusion of the interview, the interviewer summarized and rephrased what the student had narrated; this was intended to allow her to become more aware of her work and to reflect on what, in the episodes recounted, was not working (Cesari Lusso et al., 2015).

In turns 49 and 51, the student began to reflect on how social and family expectations conditioned her actions. In contrast to what she stated at the beginning of the interview, she even went so far as to state that these expectations were most likely the source of her anxiety:

47. *Francesca: it scares me (ndr degree) because I see it as a challenging thing and from the experimental a professor a commission (.) everyone expects a job well done something important*
48. Interviewer: we always go back there, everyone expects.
49. *Francesca: and (0.5) so everybody expects that (.) I'm afraid of disappointing the expectations, I see it as something bigger than me (.) instead I say if I would have been satisfied (.) instead of always aiming to expect the maximum from myself*
50. Interviewer: satisfied?

51. Francesca: *because sometimes (.) maybe I need to take a step backwards (.) not to be satisfied, but to choose (.) I'm already working and studying, and since I took a long time to finish these three exams and (.) the work (.) I know that it takes me a long time, maybe I need to limit myself (.) to be satisfied (.) to do a normal compilative thesis instead of a stubborn one, because I wanted to do the experimental thesis, so (0.5) I think that maybe I was a bit anxious about that too.*

Another element connected to the block in studies was the thought of leaving the university, which is a transition that does not necessarily take the form of a critical and negative experience, but certainly involves a temporary disorientation and a psychological, identity, and social reorganization. In addition, the difficulty of controlling the emotional variables involved also emerged:

52. Interviewer: the idea of dropping out of college.
53. Francesca: *Yeah it's like I'm still attached (.) not graduating I'm here (.) it's been a family because I spent almost 3 years between civil service part-time.*

In closing, in turn 54 emerged, on an affective level, a feeling of pleasant amazement at the information that had emerged and the change in judgment about her actions. The first interview allowed the student to reach an initial *prise de conscience* that the block in her studies did not depend on her abilities, but on a state of tension and worry connected to the fear of disappointing expectations and leaving the university:

54. Francesca: *I feel better (.) a few things to think about (0.5) something you don't think about.*

According to Vermersch (1994), it is the asking of the question that causes one to adopt a reflective stance and creates awareness.

Second Interview

The second case analyzed concerns Giulio, a student enrolled on a degree course in Computer Science. He had been diagnosed with specific learning disorder (SLD) involving relational difficulties; these difficulties occur in different situations, such as examinations or new friendships.

Giulio received the diagnosis of SLD in his last years of secondary school; he had lived for a long time with an image of himself as a not very capable and deserving student. The recognition of his difficulties, which occurred with the certification, has allowed him to continue to invest in his studies, as evidenced by his enrollment at the university; however, his emotional–motivational experiences still appear to be characterized by a certain vulnerability, as reported by the psychologist who followed him at the University of Salerno's Needs Analysis Center (Sportello di Analisi dei Bisogni).

Lived Experience

According to the goals of the elicitation interview, the researcher guided the student toward the verbalization of concrete actions. The student's initial narrative appeared as a kind of mental vagueness. Through relays and rephrasing, the interviewer repeatedly helped the student stay in touch with the specific situation. In turn 2, two elements emerged: The belief that they will not pass the exam (despite the student claiming to have repeated well) and the thought of "blocking." The student in the narrative claimed to have blocked, but in evoking the image of the task, he remembered some questions as "not difficult" (he had repeated them previously). Despite this, the thought of blocking returned (turn 20):

1. Interviewer: enter the classroom
2. Giulio: *I think I repeated well and I wasn't passing.*
3. Interviewer: what is the first thing you remember seeing when you entered the classroom
4. Giulio: *I was one of the first ones*
5. Interviewer: your first thought
6. Giulio: *let's hope it goes well*
7. Interviewer: then what happens
8. Giulio: *it is the first time and I understood that I needed a separate form (.) but at that moment I couldn't do it so I thought (.) ok if I can't do it I will ask for the next time*
9. Interviewer: when did you think you needed a form?
10. Giulio: *when I started reading the questions*
11. Interviewer: so was there an earlier step (.) where you sat down?
12. Giulio: *in the second or third row*
13. Interviewer: next to you there was someone
14. Giulio: *a friend of mine who starts with M too, so we happened to be close by*
15. Interviewer: what were you thinking in that moment?
16. Giulio: *maybe in my opinion I can't do it completely*
17. Interviewer: before you even saw the assignment?
18. Giulio: *no because I started to do it then I got stuck.*
19. Interviewer: the sooner the time comes when they turn in the assignment, see the assignment what happens
20. Giulio: *the first two were not difficult (.) then I go to do the third one, the first two I had repeated a moment before, this made me feel a bit relaxed, I manage to do them, on the remaining ones I had doubts and from there I thought 'I have to take a form' otherwise I won't pass them, I asked for a form and additional time because I get stuck (.) so I take the sheet I take the additional time before opening the sheet I close my eyes and then I see everything and then I close my eyes and I repeat myself and then I go more quiet it takes here 20 minutes more in because after read*
21. Interviewer: you said one thing "I close my eyes."
22. Giulio: *I imagined how I had to do them.*
23. Interviewer: at what point did you decide to open your eyes again and continue
24. Giulio: *when I found the right image and when I'm sure of something, I'm relaxed, I have to remove the slightest doubt, otherwise there is always that uncertainty, it can be a bit compulsive (.) but if I'm not 100% sure of something, I don't do it.*

Vermersch (2006) pointed out that during the verbalization of an action, the beliefs that subjects hold can hinder description to the point that they fail to narrate the action itself. Here, the student was so convinced of "not passing the exam," of getting

stuck, that he kept repeating "next time" and "I can't," and did not even try to recall the situation experienced (exam) and as if he was subjectively present in the activity but absent as consciousness (Vermersch, 1994).

First Awareness

During the interview, an interesting element emerged from the student's account: Imagery (turns, 25, 27). The student reported, on more than one occasion, that before acting in any situation, he imagines the reaction people might have, evokes several "possible scenarios," and chooses the scenario where the other's reaction is one of approval. In the next example, he refers to editing a music video to show to friends:

25. Giulio: *I imagine two three times the reactions of the people in front of me*
26. Interviewer rephrases
27. Giulio: *Yes (.) I try to make a unique generation of different actions and reactions (.) that person doesn't like that part (.) but there is another part that he likes.*

In later turns, it emerged that the student's thoughts were always focused on others and the fear of getting stuck. During the interview, it is apparent that the student's difficulties were related a social anxiety:

28. Interviewer: How would you describe yourself?
29. Giulio: *a normal person, a bit shy*
30. Interviewer: in what sense?
31. Giulio: *I don't know how to approach myself (.) if there are some friends I start some conversations (.) I always manage to unlock myself*
32. Interviewer: how come?
33. Giulio: *I don't know*
34. Interviewer: when you meet someone new, you told me, even during exams you always need somehow to have the time.
35. Giulio: *I had an oral exam, the first time I couldn't speak, I was blocked (.) I knew the words in my mind (.) but the words didn't come out (.) the second time I was able to speak, it is the first approach*
36. Giulio: *I can see the answer even now I can't say it*
37. Interviewer: How do you feel in this circumstance?
38. Giulio: *a little tense and a little relaxed*
39. Interviewer: what makes you feel tense and what makes you feel relaxed?
40. Giulio: *the answers I have to give*
41. Interviewer: how do they make you feel tense?
42. Giulio: *I don't know how to say the answers*
43. Interviewer: do you think there should be a right way to answer?
44. Giulio: *no otherwise you are not natural*
45. Giulio: *let's say that I don't go out much only in the school environment*
46. Interviewer: when you meet a girl
47. Giulio: *I can't talk (.) if there is a friend, yes*
48. Interviewer: Is that what scares you even in the interview with me?

49. Giulio: *It is the reaction* (here he has an insight).

At this point (turn 49), the student had an insight; in the previous narrative, he appeared confused and his emotional condition seemed altered, but after "finding" the answer, the student seemed to relax and continued the narrative, adding more information and reaching initial awareness:

50. Interviewer: what scares you about the reaction
51. Giulio: *I am always positive (.) but when I have to talk I always think of the negative*
52. Interviewer: what is this negative?
53. Giulio: *I am annoying or disturbing and I ask useless questions (.) maybe.*

From the student's initial narrative, a verbal version emerged of a kind of negative naïve representation that the student had constructed of himself, in his studies and relationships. One obstacle to verbalization was the beliefs developed by the student:

54. Interviewer: Is it helping you (university, ed.)?
55. Giulio: *maybe because I am far from home (.) at first I was afraid but I saw that knowing other people, knowing other ways, I am more unblocked (.) I always say that thing but let's try (.) let's always try (.) in case I go back home*
56. Interviewer: (.) are you unblocked?
57. Giulio: *Yes (.) since I started university.*

The effect of this reflective work was to understand the true nature of his fears and that the reality was very different from what he had constructed in his mind. He thought he had difficulty relating, but he met new friends. The reflection work, in this case, most likely led the student toward greater self-awareness and a redefinition of his role in the context.

DISCUSSION

The process of awareness is not automatic; it requires reflective work and cognitive engagement. The elicitation interview by privileging the procedural dimension of the experience (the action as it was actually carried out, how it was experienced, and who carried it out) supports the student toward a greater reflective awareness of their own skills, difficulties, and distortions. Vermersch (2004) stated that the condition for the verbalization of a past experience is that it becomes reflexively conscious. In this way, it will be possible to describe the action and bring it to consciousness, which will allow to analyze its elements, to know it, and to activate strategies to manage the difficulties. As reflected in narrative n.1, this focus on action (preparing for the exam and taking the exam) allowed the student to understand how the irrational thought of failing was actually fueled by the fear of disappointing the expectations of others and leaving the university. The student, during the narrative, acknowledged that she has skills ("I study, I've always done well in school, I enjoy it"), yet the irrational thought of failure, constant throughout the action, impacted her to such an extent that it affected her study and the outcome of the exam. From the narrative, we can see how the guidance toward verbalizing two

lived experiences led the student toward some initial awareness. She was able to reflect on aspects of the performance of which she was unaware (expectations of others and transition) that influenced the performance and, in some cases, the outcome. Vermersch (2004) stated that there are several hurdles that must be overcome during elicitation, one of which is whether the person is truly willing to engage in a reflective process. In the second account, this element emerged clearly. The student's elaborate perception of himself in the university context was so ingrained that he did not attempt to recall the situation he experienced (he was subjectively present in the activity but absent as consciousness). In this case, the researcher guided the student toward evoking a lived experience through a series of questions ("where were you sitting?" "what were you seeing?" and who was next to you?"). Again, this allowed the influence that irrational thinking (getting stuck on the exam) has on action to emerge. Several times during the dialog, the researcher helped the student focus on the experience. Initial realizations emerged in the latter part of the account: Fear of others' judgment, the source of his irrational thinking, and a redefinition of the Self in context.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aimed to show how knowledge unconsciously embedded in a given action and connected to a given context can influence subjective and intersubjective actions. Through psychological processes of awareness—cognitive acts through which the mind retraces certain experienced situations—it is possible to critically analyze and interpret such knowledge. Awareness is not produced by virtue of an automatism, but by real cognitive work that consists of searching for the reasons, meanings, and motivations behind our actions. Awareness raising, in its dialogic dimension, implies a reflexive activity necessary to find a link between actions and the motivations behind them.

In the educational field, the reflective activity promoted by self-narrative can represent, in our opinion, a valuable tool for the promotion of resilience and coping skills; reinforce and promote a sense of self-efficacy in solving problems that may characterize the life of the university student; and at the same time, mitigate the fear experienced when confronted with unexpected situations and the difficulties of everyday life. The aim of this exploratory work was to help the students understand their own experiences with respect to the difficulties they encountered during their university career. The students were supported in a reflective activity that allowed them to acquire some awareness of their ways of thinking and acting in certain situations. In different parts of the interviews, subjective experiences of unique or specific situations emerged, with a description of procedural aspects and thoughts during their actions focused on throughout.

The results showed that the reflective activity, promoted by self-narration, offered students the opportunity to (re)live the experience by affecting their perception of themselves, their relationship with the context, and their emotional experience.

Finally, the interviews showed that reflection on identity and social dimensions fosters in students processes of adaptation, as well as a more complete sense of belonging in the university context.

In conclusion, reflective activity promotes awareness processes that strengthen students'beliefs that everyday difficulties also represent a stimulus to enrich their emotional, intellectual, social, and operational resources (Cesari Lusso, 2005, 2010; Cesari Lusso et al., 2015).

"Perspective" notes on the students who participated in the interview:

Francesca successfully graduated in 2020, presenting an experimental thesis. She distinguished herself among the university's civil service volunteers for her commitment to the project and dedication to students with disabilities. She has shown great reliability in carrying out different activities, and has been noted for a cooperative style toward her colleagues.

Giulio is still completing his academic path; he takes more time in writing his exams (one to two exams per session), but he does this successfully, always achieving promotion. He followed a counseling path at the University Center and participated in a workshop for the "management of anxiety" promoted by the team of the Counseling Center.

Both students are satisfied—as reported to the psychologist at the "Analysis of Needs" desk—with the various extracurricular services offered by the university, considering them to be a solution for various personal difficulties.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not provided for this study on human participants because the study was conducted in accordance with the legislation of the Italian Code regarding the protection of personal data (Legislative Decree 196/2003); the participants were informed about the general purpose of the research, the anonymity of the answers, and the voluntary nature of participation and they signed an informed consent. There were no incentives given. This study was approved by the independent commission of the "Centro di Counseling psicologico" - University of Salerno (Italy). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MM, AI, and GS conceptualization, developed the proposal and research tool. GS and MM wrote the first draft with

inputs and comments from all other authors, conducted the statistical analysis. DD'E was supervision. All authors contributed significantly and agree with the content of the manuscript, read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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