

Aneta Słowik

University of Lower Silesia

*Écrire sa vie: Du pacte au patrimoine
autobiographique* [Writing one's life: From the
pact to the autobiographical heritage] by Philippe
Lejeune, Paris: Mauconduit, 2015, pp. 128

“As counselling researchers, why do need advice on how to write our life stories?” asked Elżbieta Siarkiewicz when we discussed Professor Philippe Lejeune’s *Écrire sa vie: Du pacte au patrimoine autobiographique* [Writing one’s life. From the pact to the autobiographical heritage]. I must admit that this comment motivated me to study the work again.

Philippe Lejeune’s book are known in Poland. Two of them – *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii* [Le Pacte autobiographique/The autobiographical pact] (Universitas, 2001), and “*Drogi zeszycie...*”, “*drogi ekranie...*”: *O dziennikach osobistych* [“Cher écran”: Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet/“Dear screen”: Personal diaries, computers and the Internet] (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2011) – have become important readings for students and scholars of the humanities and social sciences. They are very popular, especially with readers interested in (auto)biography, biographicity and (auto)biographical research.

Lejeune is known as the founder of the autobiographical contract theory.¹ Developed and refined over years, the concept finds its latest articulation in Lejeune’s recent book, which I discuss below.

Having read the book in French, I would like to strongly recommend it to readers interested in counselling studies because it answers the question that opens this review. I believe it can inspire constructive discussions within the Polish and international community of counselling researchers and practitioners, social workers and teachers. Admittedly, as the book is very comprehensive, it was difficult to select its parts for review and analysis. Additionally, I compared it with my findings from a study visit at the Association pour l’autobiographie et

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations in this text were translated by the author.

le patrimoine autobiographique (APA) [Association for Autobiography and Biographical Heritage].²

In the first chapter of the book, the author justifies his selection of texts and autobiographical works³ written by common people. In his opinion, “[r]ather than a text in which someone tells the truth about themselves, an autobiography is a text in which someone real claims that they tell the truth, and it is exactly this engagement that influences the reception of the text” (Lejeune, 2015, p. 6).

Called “an admirer of ordinary creativity” by academics, Lejeune discusses the sources of his scholarly thought, including J. J. Rousseau, M. Proust, M. Leiris, M. H. Beyle (Stendhal), F. R. Chateaubriand, G. G. Jakobson, P. Ricoeur and G. Perlek. The reader is led step by step along the way that the French researcher walked developing his passion and his studies.

In my view, two things about the book are particularly noteworthy. One of them is the titanic work Lejeune put into making the book as he travelled across France and Europe (also Poland) and searched the archives, museums and libraries for documents and materials. The other is the multiplicity of inspirations driving the book, which draws on a variety of discourses, sciences and publications. Lejeune’s skill at “juggling” this interdisciplinary variety into coherence is truly remarkable and can serve as a model of doing research.

In the following chapter, Lejeune presents the detailed history, mission, statute of the APA and the pursuits of its members. Their activities and projects can be viewed as opposing the tendency to produce specimens of mass autobiography represented by “typical,” “characteristic” and “representative” autobiographies of particular environments, generations, groups, ethnic minorities etc.

This part of the book emphatically articulates the author’s idea of exceptionality and importance of the individual life-course. I consider this principle the foundation of counselling interaction. Counselees can communicate their problems, put facts in order, construct individual experiences and search for solutions through oral or written self-narratives (cf. Demetrio 1999; 2000; 2009⁴). The book’s distinct foci, consistently sustained throughout its parts, are attention to and reflection on individual autobiographical narratives.

The APA members engage in in-depth, meticulous and empirical studies of individual lives in so-called reading groups. Autobiographies sent over to the Association are read by a group as well as individually. Subsequently, the participants share their reflections informed by understanding, friendliness, empathy and care

² The APA was founded in 1992 mostly by adults interested in writing, editing and interpreting autobiographical texts. My study visit in Ambérieu-en-Bugey (France) in June 2015 was made possible by Professor Olga Czerniawska’s inspiration and engagement.

³ The category includes diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, epistolary texts and genres close to biography, such as personal stories, autobiographical poems, private diaries, self-portraits and essays.

⁴ The publication of Demetrio’s books in Poland was possible because of consistent efforts of Professor Olga Czerniawska.

for the individuals' lot. For those who wait for feedback (the authors of the autobiographies), the very fact that someone takes an interest in their lives is precious. It is important for the authors that "my' life is not anonymous and forgotten anymore, that it does not disappear among the lives of the others."

As a visitor in the APA headquarters and archives, and also as an active participant in the Day of Autobiography, I could see the system which I refer to as informal counselling function in practice. In conversations with me, people who had submitted their autobiographies to the APA explained their motivations: "my life will continue even after my death," "maybe my family will come looking for the autobiography and find out how I saw the events; they could understand something," "maybe my grandchildren will learn about my personality, how I lived, and why I lived in this way?"

In the following chapters, Lejeune demonstrates implicitly that autobiographies, besides the need for them to be "materialised" and to gain some form, could be a space where people can search for solutions to the problems/difficulties they experience. Looking into and examining others' lives, people can find patterns and ready-made formulae of "good" and "safe" life; scrutinising the dilemmas others have experienced, people can find answers to their own questions. Such considerations are also part of the motivations behind sharing one's life story. My interlocutors hoped that "my mistakes, choices and decisions could be useful," "someone can make use of them, they can prevent something bad from happening or do others some good." In this way, the authors of autobiographies offer others a "gift" of their life experience, which is treated by the researchers as a counselling activity. It serves as a guide to life, but one written and comprehended in a different way – a guide to life and a guide for living people. It comprises very interesting human stories and, at the same time, answers such questions as "How to live today?" or "What is the point of living at all?" The people I talked to said that in another person's life story they could find solutions to their own problems, failures and anxieties, which they could also offer to other people instead of keeping them for themselves. The researchers believe that this space constructed of biographies produced and offered and of the visible engagement in their production and interpretation is replete with knowledge about how counselling processes are established and sustained, about how people become counsellors and about how people become counselees.

According to Lejeune, the very reading of autobiographies is an effort that demands active engagement of the reader (and, I would add, of the "advice-seeker"). In the following chapter the researcher elucidates these issues by spelling out the differences between autobiography and literature: "Literature has a definite aim, and as it imposes itself on the reader, one can simply give in to it with the work already done and the pleasure guaranteed. The oral narrative of one's life and "common" writing develop as one listens to them. There is less pleasure here in what one has obtained and more pleasure in what one has gained through one's own effort

[...] Working on autobiography involves cooperation in which one self responds to two people and thus produces a dialogue” (Lejeune, 2015, p. 9).

Essential features of this process (which I regard as counselling) include intimacy, trust and discretion, all of them ensured by the “private” and secret interaction with (one’s own or someone else’s) autobiography. Thinking on the reasons for and the consequences of a given decision, of one’s own or someone else’s choices, “flows” unlimited and unconstrained. Opinions, thoughts and conclusions are encouraged even if they are far-fetched and controversial, especially in such an informal and intimate space because they arise from the *autobiographical contract*. No one will limit the time of this encounter or denounce and criticise the views offered and worked through. Even the “irritating” stories that deny one rest could be “taken” later to a professional counsellor. The reading of an autobiography can induce one to seek available formal counselling. It can create a space for a symbolic and secure meeting of a counsellor and a counselee. Some APA members assured me that the contact with an autobiographical texts could have such mechanism and effects.

In the penultimate chapter, Lejeune addresses changes in the very autobiographical “materials,” which take digital, electronic and visual forms. The author realises that autobiographical genres mutate as, crucially, the individual narrative identity changes from Antiquity to the Enlightenment and Romanticism to modernity and liquid postmodernity. Referring to the process of identification, Lejeune states in the introduction: “I have tried to track carefully the metamorphoses of autobiographical creativity as it shifts from writing to first-person cinematic self-portrayals and as it continues in writing but with the Internet as the chief medium now” (Lejeune, 2015, p. 7).

Lejeune does not present himself as a counselling researcher although, in my view, he is one. It is very important (for counselling researchers) to perceive memoirs,⁵ letters, private diaries and autobiographical sketches as produced by *homo consultans* for *homo consultans* and counsellors. Lejeune masterfully combines educational science, diary studies, cultural anthropology and literary studies. He has also developed an interdisciplinary research toolkit facilitating an accurate and critical use of findings generated in several scholarly disciplines. Lejeune’s work has so many relevant uses in the humanities and social science that it can be called art. As early as in 1935, Albert Thibaudet (a student of Henri Bergson) described autobiography as, first and foremost, “art made by people who are not artists, a novel written by people who are not novelists” (qtd. in Lejeune, 2015, p. 5). And Lejeune and the APA members deserve huge credit for their appreciation of the value of “everyday” and “common” artists.

⁵ Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas showed how important such personal materials (e.g. memoirs, letters, poems, press announcements, drawings) could be. On 9-11 May, 2018, the University of Lower Silesia will host an international conference dedicated to the centenary of the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. More details available at www.tomasznaniecki2018.dsw.edu.pl.

Returning to the question asked by E. Siarkiewicz, I will try to answer it by citing Jean-Paul Sartre. I believe that writing about one's life is necessary for counselors, counselling researchers, readers and fans of autobiographies, in the first place, because "a whole man [is] composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any" (Sartre, 1981, p. 255). All counsellors must work based on respect and the belief that every human life-course is unique. Polish counselling researchers have shown the potency of insights into individual life stories and reflections on human experiences compiled in various documents – a power that is exceptionally relevant to explorations of the counselling processes and to counsellor training. These ideas are explored in *Uczenie się – doświadczanie – immersja. Poradnictwo zaangażowane* [Learning, experiencing, immersion: Engaged counselling] edited by Elżbieta Siarkiewicz and Bożena Wojtasik (Wydawnictwo DSW, 2016).

In this review, I have tackled only a few issues from the many discussed in Lejeune's rich work. At this point, I can only urge all those interested to read the book thoughtfully on their own as it is soon to be released by the University of Lower Silesia Press and encourage them to meet Professor Lejeune personally at the *Horizons of helping* counselling studies seminar which will be held at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław. Its main goal will be to discuss Lejeune's book from the counselling studies (and other) perspectives.

References

- Demetrio, D. (1999). *Zabawa na tle życia. Gra autobiograficzna w edukacji dorosłych* [Il gioco della vita: Kit autobiografico/The game of life: An autobiographical kit] (A. Skolimowska, Trans.). Kraków, PL: Impuls. (Original work published 1999).
- Demetrio, D. (2000). *Autobiografia. Terapeutyczny wymiar pisania o sobie* [Raccontarsi: L'autobiografia come cura di sé/Telling one's story: Autobiography as self-therapy] (A. Skolimowska, Trans.). Kraków, PL: Impuls. (Original work published in 1996).
- Demetrio, D. (2009). *Pedagogika pamięci. W trosce o nas samych, z myślą o innych* [Pedagogia della memoria: Per se stessi, con gli altri/The pedagogy of memory: Self-care with others in mind] (A. Skolimowska, Trans.). Łódź, PL: Wyd. AHE. (Original work published 1998).
- Lejeune, P. (2001). *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii* [Le Pacte autobiographique/The autobiographical pact] (W. Gajewski, Trans.). Kraków, PL: Universitas. (Original work published 1975).
- Lejeune, P. (2011). *Drogi zeszycie... „drogi ekranie...” O dziennikach osobistych* ["Cher écran": Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet/ "Dear screen": Personal diaries, computers and the Internet] (A. Karpowicz, M. Rodak, & P. Rodak, Trans.). Warszawa, PL: Wyd. UW. (Original work published 2000).
- Lejeune, P. (2015). *Écrire sa vie. Du pacte au patrimoine autobiographique* [Writing one's life: From the pact to autobiographical heritage]. Paris, France: Mauconduit.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1981). *The words: The autobiography of Jean Paul Sartre* (B. Frechtman,

Trans.). New York, NY, & and Toronto, Canada: Random House. (Original work published 1964).

Siarkiewicz, E. & Wojtasik, B. (Eds.). (2016). *Uczenie się – doświadczanie – immersja. Poradnictwo zaangażowane* [Learning, experiencing, immersion: Engaged counselling]. Wrocław, PL: Wyd. Nauk. DSW.