

## **Biographical Narratives of Olympic Athletes: an Access Road to Identity and Brazilian Sports Imagery**

**Katia Rubio**

School of Physical Education and Sport  
University of São Paulo

### ***Introduction***

The sport is constituted as a social phenomenon that depends directly on the figure of the athlete, the protagonist of the sporting spectacle. Athletes are responsible for the promotion and perpetuation of Olympism. Therefore important in understanding the reasons and motives that lead these people to engage in this activity that involves abstinence from social life and above average dedication to a regimented life and intended for incessant repetition of technical gestures.

The public face of the athlete is to be envied, but little understood what this is necessarily your obsessive side to reach the goals related to the search result and the win.

The understanding of this process is as crucial as the technologies development related with biological aspects that evolved greatly over the past century. However, the diversity and multiplicity of stories and individual trajectories hamper studies seeking average standards by revealing the origin of these talents.

The aim of this article is to discuss the role of narratives of four Brazilian Olympians for the constitution of the social memory of Brazilian sport and of sports imagery. This study was possible due to the research "Olympic Memories by Brazilian Olympians" held in the last fifteen years from the narratives of stories of Brazilian athletes who participated in the Olympic Games. Through this research, more than 1,300 interviews were conducted in the format of life stories, where it was possible to extract not only the objective data of the trajectory of the Brazilian Olympic athletes, but also content of latent order, allowing inferences about issues related to the construction of subjectivity of these people and the construction of their identities both as athletes and as post-athlete citizens.

### ***Method***

This research uses the method of biographical narratives (Rubio, 2014) originated in life stories, storytelling and oral history (Bosi, 1994, 2003; Debert, 2004; Meihy and Hollanda, 2007). Were interviewed 1,225 Olympic athletes over 15 years of activities. These Brazilian athletes participated at the Olympic Games since Los Angeles (1932) to London (2012) in 27 different Olympic disciplines. 1,018 of these interviews were conducted in person and the rest were done by video conference or in writing. The initiation of dialogue was made from the request "please tell me your life story." This stimulus generated dialog in some cases lasted about 20 minutes and in other reached 7 hours. The content of these dialogues were extracted topics that generated the present reflection.

### ***Social Memory and Life Stories***

The investigation underlying this article had its beginnings in research on the history of the Brazilian Olympic medalists. The results of this research led to a cartography of Brazilian sports imagery (Rubio, 2001), whose memories pointed to situations related to training, competitions, the institutional structure of Brazilian sport, from the perspective and understanding of the sports spectacle protagonist's. The history of these athletes began in the Antwerp Olympics in 1920 when three medals were won in the first Brazilian Olympic participation.

Since then 107 medals were won, which represented less than 10% of the Brazilian population totaling 1,800 Olympic athletes who participated in any Olympic edition. In contact with the winning group history was possible observed that there were other issues that needed for mapping the sport imagery and it was then necessary to know the trajectory of the other 90% people not interviewed. The term "person" is used because there is a social dimension, as pointed by Sá (2007). According to the author, "the reference to 'person' means recognizing it as a product of socialization processes, as occupying positions and playing social roles, as endowed with an identity constructed through social interaction and reflexively aware of it" (p. 292 ).

This condition distinguishes the subject, a modern creation and producer of subjectivity, from the individual, an isolated entity in the social context.

The initial search for life stories occurred by the understanding that it was necessary to allow athletes to organize their memories and trajectories so that they can report not only the objective components of this experience and the main achievements, Olympic participations, influences, but mostly personal and subjective components full of affection and emotions of all kinds. The association between these two instances would bring necessary clues for understanding the complexity of a person who combines the condition of an extraordinary motor skill level to ordinary human condition, who shares the same anxieties and expectations of others who live in society.

As pointed by Bosi (1993), much more than any source of oral or written statement, it requires systematization effort and clear interpretive coordinates (p. 277). The initial effort, then, to master the method resulted in the definition of the first group of research restricted to Olympic medalists. The guiding question of these stories was the understanding of the intrinsic motivation of human beings who also live a life of limited duration. Many of them claim, throughout their narratives, the athlete is a being who dies twice: once in life, at the end of his athletic career, and another at the moment he stops breathing.

I took a few years for me to understand the nature of this work, which approached a "history of mentalities", as defined by Le Goff (1976). For the author, "the first attractive of mentalities lies precisely in its inaccuracy", and I actually started to realize along the meeting and contact with athletes, that the heterogeneity and the differences were the unifying agent of this group, making the search itself imprecise. Many times I answered imprecisely questions about how to perform the analysis of data obtained from interviews, since I clearly put myself in a position distant from the analysis or content, which is the shortest path for those seeking research making use of interview.

Le Goff (1976) points out that the lack of boundaries has led historians of mentalities to seek an approach with other human sciences, such as demography, which allows quantification of behaviors; ethnology, which seeks to understand cultural aspects of the phenomenon; sociology, to understand the social aspects involved with the individual; and psychology, to understand individual and collective attitudes. These approaches have gained clear contours after contact with the narrative of athletes from different sports, historical periods and social contexts, distinguishing them by what made them unique, i.e., their life stories, but these approaches brought them together when it came to issues that marked their stories such as difficulties or impediments in competitions, whether for policy or institutional reasons. Understanding these reasons came from narratives full of affectivity, which favored the revival of memories almost always followed by expressions like "I had never spoken about it" or "I did not think I could remember such details" or "I had never told anyone about this".

The process of organization of memories translated into narratives include important issues in the field of social memory, because, as suggested by Halbwachs (2006), memory is not a literal reproduction of experiences, but a recreation of the past from accumulated experiences, the moment lived and influences of the subject's social and cultural context. For the author, "our memory does not rely on learned history, but on lived history. For history, we must understand not a chronological sequence of events and dates, but everything that makes a period to be distinguished from others, from which books and narratives in general present us with only a very schematic and incomplete definition".

When referring to their own trajectory, athletes invariably bring in their narratives the memory of people and professionals who influenced the desire for the sport, the search for better living conditions, training or living with other athletes who also competed at that historic moment and whose careers crossed, pointing to the urgent need to contextualize these situations to promote the understanding of remarkable facts of their lives and their results.

It should be highlighted in the process that competitive results obtained, whether victorious or not, are closely associated with adversative conjunctions aimed at establishing ideas of opposition, contrast or compensation in relation to these episodes. These constructions are even more common among those who occupied second and third positions on the podium or among those who have not even reached it. When it comes to athletes from team sports, this condition is even more evident because several of them report their memories on the same lived content, pointing to the subjectivity involving the construction and elaboration of that content even lived collectively. Since this multiplicity of interpretations was perceived, and consequently the truths about the same fact, I started to take a more comprehensive and less analytical narrative posture for understanding that each person carries a truth about a certain situation.

More than universal truths, the deal with narrative suggests partial, individual or even momentary truths based on the intensity of the memories that emerge on the topic in question. Dealing with this imprecision, besides generating uneasiness about the process, requires a constant search on the performance of interviews and also on the analysis of the material that emerged from them. Different individual stories earned a collective character when added to other narratives already collected at other times. This represented for me a hard work of search for these least common multiples that allowed the construction of temporary and personal scenarios.

Ariès (1990) points out that at the present time, lived by the historian, is the origin of the interest for mentalities, which seeks the rupture between the time of the historian and story time itself, the past. "The analysis of these transfers of ideas and sensitivity allows subtracting pieces from the past and putting them into present as to make it transparent" (p. 173). The observation of these ruptures allows the understanding of changes in institutions and their influence on the progress of athletes' career.

When we started the search for medalist athletes, many of them were found in the condition of "post-athletes"<sup>1</sup> with a rupture between past and present. I found people with trajectories marked by competitive life, by glory and visibility provided by their activities and after this stage, they developed other identities, linked or not to sport. Some of these athletes had their image indelibly associated for years or decades to sport they practiced and titles they won, but most of them have these images stored in albums, videotapes and personal memories recorded in the memory itself. Depending on how this process of building the new identity occurred, or even the success achieved after the change, the narrative constructed as subject "of the present" carries with more pronounced or subtle colors the glories or troubles of the past. In other cases, this process did not occur, even though many years have passed, and the narrative, then, comes full of a confusing mix of past and present, recurring to a subject that no longer exists, but remains stronger than the person who narrates his own trajectory in the present.

This observation is in line with Pollack (1992), who reported that memory is partly inherited and refers not only to the physical life of the person. It undergoes fluctuations due to the time it is being processed and manifested, so the need to understand the reasons that lead to its structuring, hence the assertion that memory is a built phenomenon.

Built phenomenon means the verbalized expression of a fact given a new meaning by the narrator, since it refers to something that already occurred and presently revived through speech, which gains a new form, both descriptive as affective.

According to Benjamin (2012), for a long time, narrative flourished in an artisan environment and it is, in a sense, an artisan form of communication. "It is not interested in broadcasting the "pure in itself" of the narrated thing, as an information or a report. It gives the thing to the life of the narrator to then withdraw it from him. Thus, the narrator's brand is printed on the narrative as the potter's hand on the vessel clay" (p. 221). It was found over these nearly two decades working with Brazilian Olympic athletes that the invitation to reflect on their own history leads to an attitude of introspection that favors the creation of images and memories, allowing the reconstruction of memory. Temporal and geographical differences mark the narrations; however, the tie that binds the narrators of different modalities in different historical moments is the condition of being athlete that, although has undergone profound changes over the twentieth century, maintains a unit related to the pursuit of excellence, the competitive nature of the activity and the submission to a system marked by hierarchy and power of institutions that make their lives.

These similarities and differences suggest that the social memory of the Olympic sport consists of relationships established with the memories generated by all those who participated in the construction of the athletes' career, whether from school, Brazilian and foreign clubs and professionals who interfere, directly or indirectly, in the path of those who participated in the Olympic Games.

Pollack (1992) points out that many experienced events, as those shared either by the memories of others or by orality, are the individual and collective memory. "They may be events of which the person did not even participate, but in the imagination, became so important that it is almost impossible to know whether he participated or not " (p. 02).

---

<sup>1</sup> Term used to refer to athletes who have lived the career transition, are no longer competitive Olympic level athletes and in the present play new social roles (Rubio, 2012). That's because we understand that the athlete does not lose that bond with his past, hence the impossibility to be designated as an ex-athlete.

We must highlight the fact that personal memory is located at the intersection of networks of the present and the multiple interferences determined by life in society.

Halbwachs (2006) states that we are made to remember something because those who lived and shared with us make us act, without the necessity of being together in person. "In the foreground of memory of a group, memories of events and experiences that relate to the majority of its members and that result from their own lives and relations with nearby groups or those who were more often in contact with them stand out".

The inevitable relationship between the individual and the group to which it belongs give rise to the perception of self and others and also records the events that mark the life stories both in a chronological and linear perspective in the memory that travels in a cyclic form, driven by networks of meanings created in order to respond to the events of a lifetime.

### ***Biographical Narratives***

The beginning of the methodological approach of the research was based on life stories. Understood as a particular form of oral history, they were used as a tool to capture and organize memory using values that transcended the individual character of what was transmitted and that fits into the culture of the social group to which the narrator belongs (Rubio, 2001). This construction considers the relevant data of the narrator's trajectory giving an idea of what was his life and what he is right now. This reflexive attitude allows re-experiencing past situations not only from the point of view of the course of events, but by the reinterpretation of episodes relevant for the narrator, which allows reversing (or subverting) the narrative, following a chronology of affectivity implied in the event occurred, giving the text a context. Contributed to this construction Bosi (1993), Delgado (2006), Ferraroti (1983) and Meyer (1998), who pointed out the ways Social Psychology and Anthropology understand personal stories related to sports.

This became more complex at the time in which issues related to the formation of identity and the general and specific political scenario started to compose the narratives collected. The testimonies of these migratory processes experienced by athletes originating mainly from northern-northeastern Brazil, gender discrimination faced by women or racial and sexual identity, changes in attitude due to the need to overcome bullying or even sexual abuse by officers or members of technical committees were also heard, requiring other references of analysis for understanding these scenarios.

Since then, I understood and adopted the posture of Hall (2000, 2001) and Farrarotti (1991), according to which there is no exemption for researchers, especially in the Humanities, and that the observer is closely involved with his research, which continuously changes its field of observation, as it interacts with him. Facing social phenomena, describing them and analyzing them mean acting. This condition is even more acute when it comes to a narrator mobilized and sensitized for telling a story that, in many cases, was carefully wrapped in tissue paper and stored away from light and air. When these memories were unwrapped, new meanings to facts properly accommodated in a historical moment were found. The past brought to the present brings to life forgotten or deliberately hidden situations that will demand a tribute for having been "awaken".

Poirier, Valladon and Raybaut (1999) understand that with life stories, the researcher will try to find the *himself*, the field outside personality, the narrator's involvement at a given time, i.e., the one who assigned a personal value (giving it thus an existence in itself and outside itself). Thus, the life story "is regarded not as a finished product, as it is usually presented, but as a raw material on which, and from which, one has to work" (p. 38th).

The exercise of the narrative involves the effort of searching for images and memories of the past of someone who transforms this information into verbalization, thereby promoting the recreation or transcreation of a story.

This dynamics includes the exercise of memory, the action of recalling, the capture of time and its transposition into a form of language. If in past, orality was the main route of narrative productions, written language has appropriated this construction and then unfolded in different styles, either poetic, novelistic, informative and, why not, deformative.

Thus, the importance of the narrative to be taken as a language from the dimension adopted by Cultural Studies (Hall, 2000; 2001; Woodward, 2000), taken as a privileged position in the construction and circulation of meaning, as Guareschi, Medeiros and Bruschi (2003) and Silva (2000). Language goes beyond reporting or transmitting meanings, and also constructs them. Thus, natural facts, also called reality, are seen as discursive phenomena, whose meanings arise from language games and classification systems in which they are inserted.

Therefore, speech is not understood in its linguistic aspect or as a set of words, but as a set of practices that produce effects on the subject.

In this perspective, everything one thinks or says of reality is a reflection and a projection of lived experience as real, regardless of the statement of this reality outside the subject and the senses that are given to it. That is, the existence of materiality connected with what is thought and said, linked to speech. Although reality is intangible, it is known that it exists and that it is connected with the representation that one has of it (Veiga-Neto, 2000).

Oral historical memories include phenomena of social memory that, as Sá (2007), are the non-documentary sources that oral history deals with. The concern of social psychologist is not the preservation of reports or the reliability of sources, "but rather with the process and circumstances under which those memories are built, rebuilt or updated by more or less large social groups, and by different criteria, sufficiently circumscribed" (p. 294).

If in orality, recreating a narrative was a constant among generations, the written language has operated a restriction on the form of communication of narrated contents, and it is up to the reader the ability to multiply interpretations of the text. Verbal representations of memory allow recreating the history of the subject, favoring the development of identity constructions. In this sense, these biographical narratives are also identity narratives and favor different perspectives of the analysis (Carvalho, 2007; Fanton, 2011; Khoury, 2001; Maluf, 1999; Oliveira, 2011; Pena, 2004).

Biographical narratives are understood as individual speeches which offer an understanding of narrator, the world and the experiences accumulated in the course of existence.

Schutze (2014) believes that this form of narrative, full of personal experiences of everyday character, promotes a closeness of situations experienced by the narrator both in relation to the intensity as to the veracity of facts. This is possible because the narrator expresses a unique and singular history.

Biographical narratives of Brazilian Olympic athletes initiated as life stories, is the reunion of the subject-athlete with his subjectivity, with his identity, or identities, and with society at the time he had competitive and public life, in the case of post-athletes and in the present time, as actors of other social roles. These positions became manifest for some athletes, as for me, as researcher from the enchantment that both were living with the elucidation of a fact not meant earlier. These insights<sup>2</sup> helped, on the one hand, the athlete to develop situations experienced and not clarified until that moment either due to the impossibility of reliving them or to the simple lack of opportunity, and on the other hand, they allowed me to "talk" with the method and understand what it was not. For a time I believed it was life story, then, that it was oral history, or nearly biographies, up to reach biographical narratives.

Ricoeur (2010) believes that there is a correlation between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience that is not purely accidental, but presents a form of transcultural necessity. Time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated as a narrative and the narrative reaches its plenary significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence (P. 93), hence the importance and necessity of understanding the dimension of time in biographical narratives.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The Olympic Games of the modern era have become one of the biggest socio-cultural phenomena of the planet. Over a century of existence, it changed habits, introducing sport in education and health agenda through the use of the figure of the athlete as a multiplier of great deeds and identity ideal. The athlete then began to be used in an institutional manner as spokesman for a healthier lifestyle and becoming someone that approximates the spectacular figure of the hero. Retrieved from this mythical condition and rehumanized, either during competitive career or in the post-athlete condition, the athlete can give new meaning to his trajectory from the reflexive act that involves organizing and verbalization of his memories.

This gesture involves not only an immersion in the events that mark his career in an objective and linear manner, but also refers to the emergence of affective content, often repressed for the survival of the moment at which the situation occurred.

---

<sup>2</sup> For Psychology, the term insight is understood as internal understanding, sudden comprehension, sudden apprehension, sudden vision, discernment (Sandler, Dare and Holder, 1977). Faced with the impossibility of literal translation, intravision neologism is related to this concept (Abel, 2003).

The moment of verbalization of this narrative makes it unequivocally supportive because it refers to sharing, at the same time it exposes the person and his closest contents and allows the researcher the transcreation of his biography, expanding its content to a greater understanding of the sphere such as the social group, the sport practiced, the results obtained in that historical moment and the Brazilian Olympic sport more broadly.

I believe that the main, if not the greatest contribution of biographical narratives of Brazilian Olympic athletes is the possibility of knowledge of this being publicized as divine into essentially human.

## References

- ABEL, M. C. O insight na psicanálise. *Psicologia Ciência e Profissão*, Brasília, v. 23, n. 4, dez. 2003. Disponível em <[http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1414-98932003000400005&lng=pt&nrm=iso](http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1414-98932003000400005&lng=pt&nrm=iso)>. Acesso em: 27 ago. 2014.
- BENJAMIN, W. *Obras escolhidas*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2012.v. 1
- BOSI, E. A pesquisa em memória social. *Psicologia USP*, S. Paulo, 4 (1/2), p. 277-284, 1993.
- BOSI, E. *Memória e Sociedade*. São Paulo: Cia. das Letras, 1994.
- CARVALHO, I.C.M. *Biografia e identidade: aportes para uma análise narrativa. ambientalmente sustentável*. (I), 3, 2007.
- CASSIRER, E. *Antropologia filosófica*. São Paulo: Mestre Jou, 1977.
- CRUSHANK, J. *Tradição oral e história oral: revendo algumas questões*. In.: M. M. Ferreira e J. Amado (Orgs.) *Uso s& abusos da história oral*. Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 2002.
- DELGADO, L. A. N. *História oral: memória, tempo, identidades*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2006.
- FANTON, M. *Sujeito, sociedade e linguagem. Uma reflexão sobre as bases teóricas da pesquisa com narrativas biográficas*. Civitas, Porto Alegre, v. 11, n. 3, p. 529-543, 2011.
- FERRAROTI, F. *Histoire et histoires de vie*. Paris: Librairie des Meridiens, 1983.
- GUARESCHI, N. M. F.; MEDEIROS, P. F.; BRUSCHI, M. E. *Psicologia Social e Estudos Culturais: rompendo fronteiras na produção do conhecimento*. In.: N. M. F. Guareschi e M. E. Bruschi (Orgs.). *Psicologia Social nos Estudos Culturais*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2003.
- HALBWALCHS, M. *A memória coletiva*. São Paulo: Centauro, 2006.
- HALL, S. *A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade*. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A, 2001.
- HALL, S. *Quem precisa de identidade? In.: Identidade e diferença. A perspectiva dos Estudos Culturais*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000.
- KHOURY, Y.A. *Narrativas orais na investigação da história social*. Projeto História, São Paulo, (22), jun. 2001.
- MALUF, S. W. *Antropologia, narrativas e busca de sentido*. Horizontes Antropológicos, Porto Alegre, 5, 12, p. 69-82, dez. 1999.
- MAZZOLENI, G. *Planeta cultural: para uma antropologia histórica*. São Paulo: Edusp, 1992.
- OLIVEIRA, P. *Narrativas identitárias e construções subjetivas. Considerações teóricas e análise empírica de identificações entre jovens de classes populares*. Civitas, Porto Alegre, 11, 1, p.156-171, jan-abr 2011.
- PENA, F. *Biografias em fractais: múltiplas identidades em redes flexíveis e inesgotáveis*. *Revista Fronteiras – Estudos Midiáticos*. VI (1): 79-89, janeiro/junho 2004.
- POIRIER, J.; VALLADON, S. C.; RAYBAUT, P. *Histórias de vida. Teoria e prática*. Oeiras: Celta, 1999.
- POLLACK, M. *Memória e identidade social*. *Estudos Históricos*, Rio de Janeiro, vol.5, n. 10, 1992, p.200-212.
- RICOEUR, P. *Tempo e narrativa*. São Paulo: WMF Martins Fontes, 2010.v. 1
- RUBIO, K. *O atleta e o mito do herói*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2001.
- RUBIO, K. *Medalhistas olímpicos brasileiros: histórias, memórias e imaginário*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2006.
- Rubio, K. (Org.) *As mulheres e o esporte olímpico brasileiro*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2011.
- Rubio, K. *Destreinamento e transição de carreira no esporte*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 2012.
- SÁ, C. P. *Sobre o campo de estudo da memória social: uma perspectiva psicossocial*. *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica*, 20 (2), 290-295.
- SAFRA, G. *A face estética do self*. São Paulo: Unimarco, 1999.
- SANDLER, J.; DARE, C.; HOLDER, A. *O paciente e o analista*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1986.
- SCHÜTZ, F. *Biography Analysis on the Empirical Base of Autobiographical Narratives: How to Analyze Autobiographical Narrative Interviews*. Parte I. Disponível em [http://www.profit.uni.lodz.pl/pub/dok/6ca34cbaf07ece58cbd1b4f24371c8c8/European\\_Studies\\_2008\\_vol\\_1.pdf#page=152](http://www.profit.uni.lodz.pl/pub/dok/6ca34cbaf07ece58cbd1b4f24371c8c8/European_Studies_2008_vol_1.pdf#page=152). Acesso em: 30 ago. 2014.
- SILVA, T. T. *A produção social da identidade e a diferença*. In.: T. SILVA (Org.) *Identidade e diferença: a perspectiva dos Estudos Culturais*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000.