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ENTREPRENEURS' LIFE HISTORY: STRATEGY AND RESEARCH METHODS TO STUDY ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING

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Purpose: Propose that, based on the life history of startups founders, it should be possible to reveal learning processes that occurred during their lives, even before they got involved in entrepreneurial practices.

Design/Methodology: Within a qualitative and interpretivist approach, Life History is used as a guiding strategy and method for gathering data. In addition, seeking to delineate the investigation of experiences by entrepreneurs, we conducted semi-structured interviews focused on thematic stories. To analyze the data, two interconnected strategies were used - narrative analysis and the abductive method.

Main results: The results make it possible to identify the involvement of entrepreneurs with various social practices. These practices point to the lifelong journey of these entrepreneurs as a continual process of learning, indicating fragments of learning which occur and become relevant to the current entrepreneurial practice.

Theoretical/methodological contributions: This article highlights the situated nature of entrepreneurial learning as a process anchored in social practices that begins before involvement in an entrepreneurial action. In terms of methodology, this study suggests a path to contribute to the formation of a research agenda within the Brazilian context.

Relevance/originality: The article highlights the Life History and the Thematic Interview as tools that will facilitate the work of future researchers interested in revealing entrepreneurs' learning processes not just before an entrepreneurial practice but also during the beginning of the entrepreneurial process and the running of their businesses.

Keywords: Life History. Thematic Interview. Narrative. Entrepreneurial Learning. Social Practice Theories.

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1 Introduction

The second half of the 20th century was a period marked by various turns in the social sciences, such as Historical (Burke, 2005), Interpretative (Morgan & Smircich, 1980; Reckwitz, 2002), Linguistic (Habermas, 1990; Sombra , 2008) and Practice (Gherardi, 2012, Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2002). All of them reflect on aspects of subjectivity, discourse, and praxis (Vizeu, 2010), and their assumptions offer researchers new paths in the investigation of social dynamics.

In virtue of this, entrepreneurship research, first characterized mainly by an economic approach (Baumol, 1968; Kirzner, 1973), has changed to a humanist perspective (McClelland, 1972). Then, at the end of the 1980s, this research field gained again a new horizon with the turnaround led by William B. Gartner. This new perspective made it possible to analyze entrepreneurship as a dynamic rather than a static process (Gartner, 1988; Kuratko, Morris, & Schindehutte, 2015; Moroz & Hindle, 2012; Rae & Carswell, 2000, 2001; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000).

This led research in this area to focus on the process of "becoming an entrepreneur." As a result, beginning in the 1990s and gaining intensity in the following decade, research has investigated this phenomenon focusing on understanding the learning that entrepreneurs go through in the entrepreneurial process (Cope & Watts, 2000; Deakins & Freel, 1998; Festervand & Forrest, 1993; Minniti & Bygrave, 2001; Murphy, 1993; Rae & Carswell, 2000, 2001; Smilor, 1997; Young & Sexton, 1997). Thus, a new theme has emerged - Entrepreneurial Learning (EL) (Harrison & Leitch, 2008; Wang & Chugh, 2014, 2015).
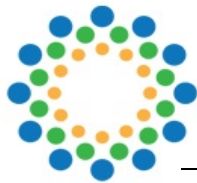
With the advance of studies focused on investigating entrepreneurial learning, the main perspectives in its study have been cognitive, experiential and social (Agbim, Owutuamor, & Oriarewo, 2013; Rae, 2004, 2005; Rae & Wang, 2015; Young & Sexton, 1997). Recently, due to the trend of considering the situated nature of the entrepreneurial learning process, international research has been directed towards the use of theoretical perspectives that employ the assumptions of practice theories (Hafeez et al., 2018; Lefebvre, et al., 2015; Rae, 2017; Secundo, Del Vecchio, Schiuma, & Passiante, 2017; Terzieva, 2016; Toutain, Fayolle, Pittaway, & Politis, 2017), which have not been observed within the Brazilian context.

Thus, by virtue of the dynamic of studies oriented towards entrepreneurial learning in recent decades (Wang & Chugh, 2014) and the recent increase in the use of the lens of practice, we place an emphasis on the need for methodological proposals that make empirical research of this phenomenon viable, especially stimulating the study of entrepreneurial learning within the Brazilian scenario. We believe that the proposal of methodological paths will contribute to the formation of a research agenda within this context. Therefore, the objective of this article is to present oral life histories as a research strategy and method which makes it possible to study the entrepreneurial learning process. To accomplish this, we have suggested a methodological proposal based on interviews conducted with the founders of startups, focusing on the narration of their journeys through life with the goal of generating reports of various practices and therefore activities that these entrepreneurs have participated in which have highlighted their moments of learning.

This research strategy/method as Kuckertz and Prochotta (2018) point out, has been little explored by researchers dedicated to the study of entrepreneurship, especially entrepreneurial learning studies conducted in Brazil (Andrade & Olave, 2015; Arantes, Freitag, & Santos, 2018; Silva, Lima, Paiva, & Lima, 2017; Zampier & Takahashi, 2014). Thus, we emphasize that narratives can be used as a tool to understand the entrepreneurial learning process. To accomplish this, we assume that the entrepreneurs, in relating their experiences and routines, will provide researchers with reports of learning processes.

In order to progress toward our stated objective, the following section will present the theoretical foundation which indicates life histories as a research strategy and method; later, we will focus on the narrative of the result of this methodological choice; and then argue that narratives provide reports of learning processes that occur in various social practices; and finally in this section we will present thematic stories as a complementary technique to the life history, making it possible to specifically investigate learning processes. Through the field work realized in the methodology section and later in the presentation of the obtained results, we will emphasize the empirical applicability of the proposed methodology.

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

101

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Life History: A Research Strategy and Method

Telling a life history or narrating stories of a life points to the need to pay attention to each of the actions that they refer to. The first, *history* refers to a life history, that is, the history of my life. The second, *story* are stories that tell personal experiences that occur in a social and historical context at some moment in life. Therefore, my life history includes various stories in my life (Atkinson, 2002; Ferrazza & Antonello, 2017; Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003). Since our lives are molded by a series of events, stories are part of who we are (Atkinson, 2002). Thus, stories are capable of bringing order and significance to experiences, and contribute to a vision that is descriptive and subjective at the same time, because a story (or stories) can be interpreted by the person telling it and the person listening to the story (Atkinson, 2002). Considering this nature, it is relevant to reveal phenomena such as entrepreneurial learning via a historical approach to the Life History (LH), which is presented here as an orienting strategy and as the method used for the data gathering (Atkinson, 2002; Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003; Jones, 1983).

In the literature it is possible to find various nomenclatures that are synonymous with LH, including, autobiography, biography, oral narrative or life narrative (Closs & Antonello, 2012). This multiplicity of concepts is derived mainly from the kind of access researchers have or how they construct stories. A life history may be obtained through conversations and interviews, for example, which is also known as Oral History (Alberti, 2005; Ferreira, Fernandes, & Alberti, 2000; Ichikawa & Santos, 2006). Due to this plurality of terms, we have opted to use the term Oral Life History (OLH).

The recognition of the relevance of this strategy/method, by virtue of the potential of this applied methodology, has stimulated discussions due to its tactical and functional nature (Cappelle, Borges, & Miranda, 2010; Closs & Antonello, 2008; Gaffuri & Ichikawa, 2016; Itelvino, Costa, Gohn, & Ramacciotti, 2015; Jaime, Godoy, & Antonello, 2007; Mageste & Lopes, 2007; Oliveira, Correa, & Delboni, 2017; Perazzo & Bassi, 2007). This results from the fact that in telling a life history, narrators relate their current vision of what happened to him or her making "the
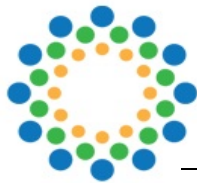
implicit explicit, the hidden revealed, the informed formed, turning confusion into clarity" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 125), making it possible to have reports of these lived (and interpreted) experiences.

Therefore, through these (oral) histories, it is affirmed that others will know us better and will have a better understanding about us (Atkinson, 2002). Thus, this method should be recognized as a tool for examining and analyzing the subjective experiences of individuals and their constructions of their social world (Jones, 1983), which enables researchers to recognize sensemaking/giving processes, when we make our lives sensible through these narratives (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011) in trying to create an explanation of world experiences (Strati, 2007).

2.1.1 Oral Life History: A Methodological Possibility

In the previous section, we presented arguments that emphasize mainly the strategic/tactical nature of OLH. However, specifically in terms of its use as a research method, we should emphasize its process/functional nature. We begin by pointing out that, to realize an applied investigation of this data gathering resource, it is not enough to simply register everything that was said by those who are talking about their lives (Alberti, 2005), and some care needs to be taken with the empirical application of this approach.

First, we must not forget the nature of the relationship between the narrator and the researcher. In this constructive process, during the exercise of listening to a life history which is orally narrated, the researcher is considered a guide (Atkinson, 2002), acting also as an interpreter (Pamphilon, 1999). Second, it should be noted that OLH goes beyond the simple observation of reports of narrated events, because it considers that the history always has a background that needs to be verified (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). Therefore, even though each life history has an individual perspective, life encompasses a series of aspects that give us information about the society this person is a part of, his or her social and cultural values, the historical and economic context, and organizations and institutions (Close & Antonello, 2012).

Keeping this in mind, the researcher's focus should be on the socio-cultural dimensions of the life narrative history, revealing the impact of historical events on the lives of individuals, without neglecting, however, individual aspects such as emotions and personal values (Pamphilon, 1999). In listing criteria that researchers should consider in utilizing this method, Jones (1983) cites: 1) the individual should be seen as a member of a culture; 2) the role of significant others, such as, for example, a family group, should be recognized; 3) the nature of social action should be considered, that is, the significant systems and modes of action should be identified contextually; 4) the continuous and relational nature of the experience over time should be a focus of analysis, emphasizing the importance of events that constitute a sequence of other historic events; and 5) the social context should be continually associated with the actions of the individual, because actions cannot be dissociated from the context within which they occur.

In short, after conducted research using the OLH as a research strategy and method, researchers will obtain reports that they can base their study on, which will go beyond individual information. This signifies that narratives will be available that will enable them to explore and discover moments of learning. In this manner, the following section will argue that narratives are the fruit of reports of life and reveal fragments of learning processes.

2.2 Narratives: The Result of Oral Life Histories

In the book *Life History and Narrative*, Hatch and Wisniewski (2003) seek to draw a distinction between these two concepts and conclude that it is difficult to create a separation between them, given that the main characteristics that differentiate them are the same that connect them. Among the similarities found are that both focus on the individual who tells his or her history and narrates based on a situated context. Thus, even if there is an individual vision in the narrative of the life history, historical, cultural, political and social aspects can be identified. That is why the narrative analysis of a life history cannot be based just on the individual vision of the individual who is telling the history, but should also acquire a broader perspective by considering other elements connected to a given report (Closs & Antonello, 2012).
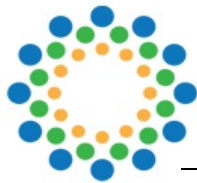
As a result of a collective viewpoint, we have a deindividualization of the narrative. Thus, what could be considered a weak point of the method – when considering a report or a point of view of a unique individual – comes to be presented as a methodological advantage, since it allows a deeper connection with a specific reality. In other words, the production of a text that is heavily dependent of the engagement and experiences of the narrator (Olesen, 2011), at the same time enables the researcher to collect multiple reports from different people to advance the construction of a comprehension of the phenomenon under investigation. In this sense, the narratives become a type of code, relate individual journeys, attitudes and perceptions, making it possible for researchers to connect the present with the past (Reis & Antonello, 2006).

Recognizing the nature of the content that can be obtained from a narrative, but also considering narratives as collective constructs, Bathmaker and Harnett (2010) affirm that this process involves various participants in its construction, including the narrator, the researcher and also the reader. In this sense, it should be emphasized that narratives obtained through life history are not rough reports, because they are the fruit of interpretations that the individual has constructed of his or her own life, even more than the interpretation elaborated by the researcher (Perazzo & Bassi, 2007). In this way, what can again be seen as a weak point, is seen as a distinctive quality of this method, because it makes it possible to have a different perspective of the experience obtained, with it being up to researchers to seek a construction of fundamental knowledge in analyzing the obtained data.

That being said, it is argued that oral narratives of life histories point to learning processes that occur during the course of the lives of entrepreneurs, to the extent that they witness or are involved with certain social practices. Thus, the following section will present the theorization of practice as a possibility for reflection about learning.

2.3 Practice Theories – New Opportunities to Reflect on Learning

Practice-based theories seek to make the researcher more articulate and capable of observing the differences that make up the complex and multifaceted

universe in which we live, which also reflect the organizational context (Gherardi, 2009; Gherardi & Strati, 2014). This approach seeks a deeper and more complete understanding of the nuances of the social world, making it inherently relational, because it sees the world as a continuous set, with nexuses and alliances among practices (Nicolini, 2012).

Social practices are a type of routine behavior that consists of various interconnected elements, such as, for example, a given way of cooking, different from just cooking as a human action. In this way, it should be taken into account that a practice, or a social practice involves various elements, such as: the body, mind, artifacts (non-human actors), knowledge, structure, and process, as well as language (Reckwitz, 2002). This multifaceted point of view of practice reveals that a given practice is not just the result of doing something that can be described simply, but rather a complex phenomenon. Given that it intends to realize a study based on a practice, the need arises for an analytic view of it, in order to consider the various elements that make it up, such as the production and use of knowledge.

In studies based on practice, knowledge is not seen as an object, but rather as a social process, human, material as well as emotional, in which "knowing and doing are one and the same" (Gherardi, 2006, p. xii). From this perspective, knowledge is accessed by practitioners not just through direct involvement in practices, or when they talk about them during the course of their participation, but also by linguistic forms (storytelling) to the extent of what they have heard about these practices (Gherardi & Strati, 2014).

This way, there is no separation between knowledge and learning in action, because both occur simultaneously. In this approach, knowledge comes to be seen not as a substance, as something that is an object like a book or materialized in another object, nor is it considered merely a property that belongs to an individual, but considers it to be mobilized in the performance of practices that involve human as well as non-human aspects (Gherardi & Strati, 2014). Thus, learning is in becoming a practitioner to the extent that there is a construct of knowledge (Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi & Strati, 2014; Strati, 2003).

In this sense, the practitioners of certain practices provide researchers with information, which enables them to have access to their world based on the obtained reports. Thus, entrepreneurs are considered practitioners who go through a process
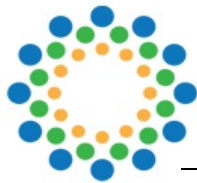
of learning throughout their lives. Therefore, we argue that oral narratives of their life histories reveal fragments of learning that occur due to their involvement with various practices, especially, but not exclusively those related to the business world and certain previous entrepreneurial practices.

2.3.1 Oral Life History Narratives: Fragments of the Learning Process

Entrepreneurs are considered exceptional apprentices because they "learn from clients, suppliers, and mainly competitors. They learn from employees and colleagues [...] and from other entrepreneurs. [...] Through experience [...] they learn from what works, and what is the most important, they learn from what does not work" (Smilor, 1997, p. 344). In this sense, by relating their life histories, with a special emphasis on experience before the present entrepreneurial practice, they provide researchers with reports about their moments of learning. Doing this, we seek to unite the life history and the narrative that is derived from this methodology, making it possible to connect life with individual stories in seeking an understanding of the human and social phenomenon – in this case, learning.

In this search for understanding of the learning process, we argue that in order to conduct interviews, researchers will obtain reports from the interviewees about aspects of their experiences, visions, interpretations, memories, opinions, perceptions, behaviors, practices, actions, activities, interactions, beliefs, and commitments, which reveal much about a social reality (Ichikawa & Santos, 2006), and are mainly vestiges of learning (Reis & Antonello, 2006). Olesen (2011) points out the use of the life history approach as a way to understand the processes of learning empirically, which permits theorizing in regard to learning within a historical context, in which individuals learn social practices which they have been socialized by.

Another example can be found in the work of Ferrazza and Antonello (2017) in which they seek to demonstrate the possibilities of approaching life history as a methodological strategy that favors the study of learning processes of cameramen. To accomplish this, the authors organized the everyday life of these professionals

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

107

and identified the practices that they were involved in daily and the learning processes that these practices encompassed.

The results of the last empirical example reveal, from the point of view of learning in practice (Gherardi, 2009; Strati, 2003), the possibility of focusing on the involvement and the direct participation in certain practices that contribute to the learning of entrepreneurs. Therefore, we argue that LH, through oral reports, permits, in addition to observations of the nature of these individuals, a reading of the knowledge produced during the narrated period. The LH offers an understanding of the practices and activities performed and how these learning processes develop during these episodes, emphasizing that thus knowledge is not developed by a single practice, but rather constructed through a series of interconnected practices (Ferrazza & Antonello, 2017).

In this manner, we argue that the methodological path proposed here should be used to conduct studies with entrepreneurs, given that this methodology can contribute to unveiling aspects of entrepreneurial learning, being formed even before any involvement in entrepreneurial practices. However, due to the complexity of learning during this process of (trans)formation (Hjorth, 2003; Hjorth & Johannisson, 2009), we believe that thematic history as a method can be useful in delineating the scope of research in a complementary manner. In this way, the methodology of thematic history is presented below to contribute to data collection in the investigation of entrepreneurial learning.

2.4 Thematic Stories Used to Delineate Entrepreneurial Learning Research

It was argued previously that a life history contains various stories (Atkinson, 2002; Ferrazza & Antonello, 2017; Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003). This indicates that in a set of life histories, various moments are narrated, some more significant to the narrators, some less so. This is where the Thematic Stories as a form of investigating specific episodes in the life of a narrator can be relevant, and can be the target of an investigator, especially in relation to moments of learning.

In developing the method of thematic stories, the thematic interview is the participation of the interviewee in the selected theme and, contrary to the life history – which has to do with a longer journey, starting with childhood and passing through
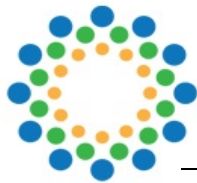
various phases of life up to the present moment, centers on something specific. A life history interview in itself contains various thematic interviews, and this is why the choice of one to the detriment of another should be based on the desired goal (Alberti, 2005). In the case of research on entrepreneurial learning, the use of a thematic story is appropriate when realized after the realization of the strategy/method of life history, mainly when there are moments that can be better explored by the entrepreneur's narrative.

Thus, it is suggested that, first of all, the oral life history should be utilized, because it is treated as a unique moment, with unique circumstances, which produces a unique result to the extent that the life reports are identified (Alberti, 2012). In a second incursion in the empiric field, it is recommended that the thematic interview be used, in order to delineate certain practices and activities in which current entrepreneurs were involved and that, in some way, enabled the construction of a set of new knowledge that lead to a learning process.

In both of these methodological approaches – OLH and thematic stories, reports of oral biographies will be obtained, which can contain some biases, including false testimony, or even imaginative interpretation or distorted reality on the part of the narrator, especially due to the fact that biographical events are defined as allocations and alterations of social space based on a view of the past from the present (Bourdieu, 2015).

This can be considered a critique and a potential way to weaken this method. However, by taking it into consideration, it is possible to turn this into an alert for researchers who use life histories as a research strategy/method and complementary thematic story, to be attentive to the complexity involved in the production of knowledge. This is especially true considering that the actors move within (or despite) social structures (Perazzo & Bassi, 2007). This strengthens the need for seeking a collective construction of knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, and not just basing it on a report, or considering it to be the absolute truth.

Therefore, there is a recognition that, in realizing a study of a qualitative nature, some care should be taken to minimize the possibility of constructing knowledge based on reports that in some way do not represent the reality that

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

109

occurred. With this alert in the back of the researcher's mind, we believe that the use of narratives based on life histories and thematic stories enables the researcher to understand the practices, processes and cultural characteristics and structures of the social world (Denzin & Lincon, 2005). This appears to be enough to assume certain risks that at times can manifest themselves during studies whose scope entails investigating subjective phenomena. These methods are recommended especially in terms of investigating practices when they are researched from a historical perspective, to the extent that it is affirm that they contribute to the development of learning processes during the lives of entrepreneurs.

Having presented this methodological proposal for the empirical conducting of an investigation of the entrepreneurial learning process, we advance to a presentation of its application through interviews realized with startup founders based on the narration of various practices, and as a result, the activities in which these entrepreneurs involved themselves during their life journeys, highlighting fragments of the learning that have occurred.

3 Methodological Procedures

3.1 Research Context

Studying EL based on a practice perspective requires methodological reflection to be viable. Therefore, this study follows Gherardi (2012) who suggests that practices can be examined "from outside," focusing on the regularity of the activities and the patterns that organize a given practice, and also "from inside", considering the point of view of the practitioners of these activities. While studying practices "from outside" focuses the attention of the researchers on doing, studying the practices "from inside" permits the observation of the learning.

In this manner, this study utilizes the presented methodology to explore how EL occurs among Brazilian startup founders, analyzing narratives in their histories and the involvement of various social practices from the point of view of these practitioners (that is, investigating the "inside" part), while also seeking to understand the patterns that constitute the current entrepreneurial practice, based on the
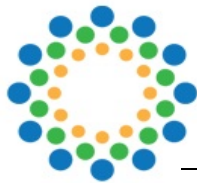
retrospective narratives of these entrepreneurs, as well as the observation of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (or in other words, investigating the "outside" part).

This study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach (Creswell, 2013), considering language as a vehicle of communication (Colebrook, 2002). Thus, we propose that it is possible to explore and discover learning processes that occur in their lives based on their life histories (Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003) and the thematic stories of these current entrepreneurs. We believe that this approach helps produce narratives that enable researchers to connect the life and stories of these narrators in seeking to understand the human and social phenomena of learning, especially when the investigation of the learning process is anchored in historical reports.

Thus, we highlight the role of researchers in data gathering as well as the analysis of the obtained data, to the extent that we became detectives trying to understand the obtained narratives (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014; Simpson, 2018), and based on them, we construct a theorization that contributes to the understanding of the investigated phenomena.

3.2 Data Gathering

First Step: Observation. Rejecting the idea of a "spectator" epistemology, we have adopted approaches in which researchers play a part in the investigation process as participants (Simpson, 2018). In this way, in the beginning of the research process, there were various moments in which the lead author dove into the entrepreneurial world – academically and practically – to unite ideas and identify aspects that will guide our research. This occurred specifically during a three year period from 2015 to 2018, but there was a period of greater intensity in the last nine months before the field work, in which this researcher participated in various events and had various related experiences. The author immersed himself in the entrepreneurial ecosystem through participation in symposiums and seminars, participation and in courses and workshops, and had various individual conversations with entrepreneurs, professors and various professionals, all with various experiences in the field of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial education.

During this period, the researcher took field notes which were used to construct a mental map utilizing the software *SimpleMind.* This process drove the definition of the research question and became the point of departure for the abductive approach that was used initially (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Peirce, 1931-1958; Simpson, 2018). This empirical situated experience became a *bricolage* supplying "instances of local knowledge" in terms of the phenomenon under investigation (Yanow, 2000, p. 262). During this journey, the experiences were continuous and connected (Dewey, 1980) and they made possible the initial observations that guided the subsequent steps in our research process.

In addition to this initial immersion in the field, the data gathering itself was an observation process, especially because 19 of the 39 interviews were conducted *in loco* in a variety of spaces – offices, coworking areas, incubators and one in a public space (a cafeteria). This signifies that during the data collection process, there were moments in which the research identified contextual elements; for example while in a room waiting for an interview to begin, or when the entrepreneur showed and explained the operational structure of the startup during a visit to the enterprise's physical installations.

Second Step: Listening to narratives. Our lives are molded by a series of events, and from these moments stories arise that are part of who we are, mainly because they connect us with our roots (Atkinson, 2002). Thus, the narration of a history (and the stories that make it up) implies the construction of a life (Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003). In this sense, the challenge is in identifying these narrative fragments of know-how, and the production of knowledge and learning (Gherardi & Perrotta, 2014; Yanow, 2000). These narratives, as in poetic language (Hjorth, 2007), seek to describe and express the lived experiences.

This is why we believe that these narratives, which result from one or more stories, are useful tools in the understanding of the EL process. Therefore, in this study we use the oral life history as a guiding strategy and data gathering method (Atkinson, 2002; Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003; Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). As a methodological strategy, it is personal and contextual (Atkinson, 2002). In this way,

we have focused on the socio-cultural dimensions of the narrated life histories, which reveal the impact of historical periods and events without neglecting elements such as emotion and values (Pamphilon, 1999). Thus, using the OLH approach, the lead author conducted 25 interviews with 18 startup founders in Brazil.
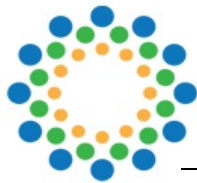
A life history contemplates various stories about the life of the narrator (Atkinson, 2002; Hatch & Wisniewski, 2003). This is why, after the first round of interviews, additional 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with other startup[3] founders to focus on thematic stories in their lives. In this round, in accordance with our abductive approach, we deeply investigated parts of the interviews obtained during the first round (for example, family history, educational, professional career, and previous entrepreneurial practices). This abductive methodological journey made it possible to investigate some specifications about the learning processes of these entrepreneurs, because we also asked the interviewees what being an entrepreneur means to them and how the process of becoming one came about.

In both rounds, the interviewees were recorded with audio tape and then following Flick (2007), the data was codified with the help of the ATLAS.ti 7. The codification process helped us manage the large quantity of data, and was the first step in analyzing the data, given that during this process, we identified some preliminary categories.

3.3 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we used two interconnected strategies. First, we performed narrative analysis (Pamphilon, 1999) to connect, based on the biographical narrative interviews, the events and experiences and actions of those interviewed (Rosenthal, 1993). In particular, we focused on how the dialogue between the narrator and researcher was expressed in the interactional process,

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[3] In the first round of interviews with the life history approach, some of the interviewees emphasized the value of partners in the process of creating a new business. In this way, in realizing the second round of interviews, half of the entrepreneurs interviewed (two duos and one trio) were partners in three different startups.

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

113

which inherently goes beyond what is verbalized (Riessman, 2005). During this process we followed Pamphilon (1999), who suggests moving between different zooms: macro-zoom (the dominant discourses and the narrative form), meso-zoom (the narrative process, narrated themes and keywords), and micro-zoom (pauses and emotions), as well as the interactions between these zooms. This sequence of research is particularly useful for researchers who wish to concentrate on the collective socio-cultural dimensions of a narrated life history and identify the impact of phases and historical events during a life journey, along with individual elements.

Second, conscious of the challenges of using just narrative analysis as a method of analysis to explore fragments of entrepreneurial learning, we also analyzed the data applying an abductive lens (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Simpson, 2018). The abductive method, rooted in Dewey's pragmatism, proposes that the experience of the subjects (the researchers, in this case) stimulates the capacity to act creatively and make use of what is available – language, concepts and theories, as tools to construct knowledge when connections are made, for example between the past and present (Elkjaer, 2009, 2018). The result of this process is reflective thinking which is aligned with our philosophical positioning (ontologically relational and epistemologically interpretivist). Thus, the experience of the immersed field researcher is seen as a way in which knowledge is generated, given that researchers are not neutral observers, but rather those who connect their own sensory experiences in interactions with others as they conduct this study (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011).

The combination of these two methodological approaches – narrative analysis and abduction – result in an exercise of attentive observation and reflection (Dewey, 1980). This methodological path has revealed itself to be sufficient for this study, because its empirical focus (attentive observation) is focused on narratives about life and experiences that point to moments in which there was involvement in certain social practices and, as a result, a base for developing knowledge which was relevant to the interviewees.
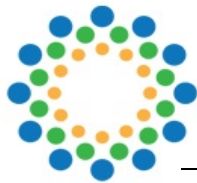
Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

114

To gather knowledge about "the world" of the interviewees, we present an analysis below of social practices, which are considered a source of knowledge and learning. At this moment we concentrated on various elements, such as activities and actions and the order of interaction in time and space (Gherardi, 2012). In addition, we considered aspects such as tools, artifacts, and other mediating aspects; practical interests; as well as tensions between creativity and normativity and the processes of legitimization and standardization (Nicolini, 2012). The objective of this analytical point of view is to delineate the experience of the interviewees (the process of becoming an entrepreneur) through involvement in certain practices, looking beyond the descriptions provided (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016).

Overall, the methodological path covered enabled us to explore and discover learning processes, among those related to entrepreneurship, which occur in the lives of the participating entrepreneurs, even before they become involved in an entrepreneurial practice. The data collected in this study provides a way to connect life and the stories of our participants and, thus achieve an understanding of the human and social phenomenon of learning. The results reveal how the founders of startups have constructed a set of learning as their lives have progressed which have helped guide them through their current entrepreneurial practices.

To explore this understanding of EL as a process that occurs in practice and is constructed before the involvement in the current entrepreneurial action, the following section presents the results of the implementation of our proposed methodology to study EL.

4 Results

The results of the data analysis suggest that a constellation of different practices is responsible for the development of a set of learning which, in turn, have been fundamental in the entrepreneurs' ability to identify opportunities, and thus create a startup. Mapping and exploring these practices, we can delineate the EL process occurring even before the entrepreneurial practice being performed. Thus,

as a point of departure to present our results, we highlight the different phases of the entrepreneurs' lives based on the obtained reports.

4.1 An Entrepreneur's Life: A Broad Vision

After realizing our field work and analyzing the data as described above, we identified the role and impact of context on EL (Toutain et al., 2017). In doing so, we recognized that there exists an EL process that occurs during the actual entrepreneurial practice that the interviewees are developing (Cowdean et al., 2019). However, it also emerged that some of the conducted interviews, especially when the participants expressed a connection between what they are experiencing at this point in their lives and the past, that there exists an entrepreneurial preparedness (Festervand & Forrest, 1993; Wang, Rafiq, Li, & Zheng, 2014) which is constructed during one's life. Since the objective of this study is to explore previous experiences in trying to understand the EL process, with it being constituted as a journey that begins before the realization of the current entrepreneurial practice, we identified various phases of life of the interviewed startup founders.

The first phase, denominated "selling lemonade," is essentially the period from childhood through adolescence (in other words, to the end of high school, before entering college). During this time, these individuals went through a set of various experiences that tied them to various social practices. Among these are some linked to family businesses or even establishing their own businesses in school (such as, for example, manufacturing and selling wristlets and organizing vacations at amusement parks). In addition, some of the interviewees related that during this period they gained experience through temporary work. According to Rae and Carswell (2001) all these experiences are important because they supply entrepreneurs – even if they are not conscious of it – with a base of knowledge connected with experiences of the world of business, which they may need later in life.

The second phase, denominated "formal education," refers to the period that entrepreneurs go to college. The emphasis here is not whether these entrepreneurs
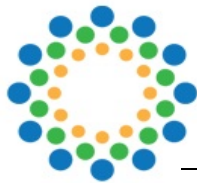
had some type of entrepreneurial education (Hahn, Minola, Van Gils, & Huybrechts, 2017), but it was while some of them were in college that they also began some type of business. In some cases, these enterprises do not exist anymore, but in others they are the businesses that these entrepreneurs are currently running. Independent of this, it is a time of life in which entrepreneurs learn about their area of study (the educational background of the 32 entrepreneurs is quite diverse), and also a time during which they construct a relationship network.

The third phase, entitled "professional experience," applies to those who did not initiate their enterprises while in college, but rather went to the job market. It is important to note that this phase does not occur necessarily after, or independently from, the "formal education" phase. These two phases can take place simultaneously, for example, when someone is doing a professional internship during college or while at the beginning of the college already was developing some professional activity. Professional experience has revealed itself to be important to some entrepreneurs due to the fact that they acquired a set of experiences and learning as well as awakening the desire to start their own entrepreneurial project.

The fourth phase, denominated "previous entrepreneurial practice," occurs when the current founders of startups already possess some level of entrepreneurial experience, initiating and administrating their own business within a traditional environment (for example, small businesses such as franchises), or in other words, enterprises not related to the use of technology (or another industry permeated by innovation), which is where the participants operate currently. These previous entrepreneurial experiences before their founding of a startup, come from attempts to start an enterprise that arose after their formal education, or after some have had some type of professional experience in the job market.

The four phases correspond to the periods of life before the beginning of the current entrepreneurial practice in which the entrepreneurs are currently engaged. This broad vision of these different trajectories offers a notion of the various social practices that these entrepreneurs have involved themselves with and the

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

117

experiences that they obtained. In addition, it may be perceived that there are other experiences that also permeate these phases, such as practicing sports, or having some type of hobby tied to music or reading, or traveling or participating in courses or events. This reveals that there is a connection between moments, people and activities which goes beyond what can be identified within the context furnished by these four phases if they are analyzed independently from the others. We have emphasized this to avoid the idea that the four phases unfold in an isolated fashion, without any connection between them and the other moments of life not captured by these phases. Our objective is to offer a broad vision of the lifelong journeys of these entrepreneurs, and at the same time we seek to point out the connections between different experiences in order to form a richer understanding of the complex process of entrepreneurial learning.

Casting a meticulous look at these four phases, we can perceive a common element that arises during the first three, not as a social practice and, as a consequence, as an experience, but rather an important aspect of the entrepreneurial aspect: the desire to become an entrepreneur. For example, as expressed by some of the interviewees who told us how they had always had a desire to become an entrepreneur, which being an entrepreneur is considered to be a *status quo* in life, especially during the "selling lemonade" phase. For those who always had a desire to be entrepreneurs, but had some type of professional experience, the argument was that working was a way to gain some previous knowledge (and the necessary funds) to one day become an entrepreneur and do this in a "better" manner, by virtue of this previously acquired knowledge.

The participants that recognize the desire to become entrepreneurs during this period in which they developed some type of professional activity, attribute the appearance and increase in this desire to dissatisfaction and a wish to change one's career, which in some cases was due to the fact that they had been fired or laid off – and this situation turned into an opportunity to change as opposed to reentering the job market. Other reasons that affect this desire to become an entrepreneur also include the perspective of seeking independence or earning more money with their own business. Some participants also expressed that the reasons listed above can
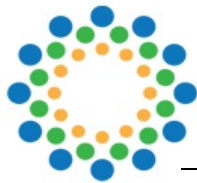
exist together with the desire to do something completely different from anything they have done in their personal or professional lives or the desire to help others in the sense of generating employment or provide new solutions to certain problems.

Family also appears as an important element in all of these phases, particularly the first and second phases. Some entrepreneurs, for example, relate that they grew up in an entrepreneurial family, and from an early age (childhood or adolescence) they were encouraged (or forbidden) to become an entrepreneur; for others their family became the reason to become an entrepreneur. Another important element that permeates all of the entrepreneurial phases is personal relationships. When the startup founders talked about their experiences with entrepreneurship, both in the past and in the present, they emphasized the importance of being constantly in contact with people. This includes the creation of a business, forming partnerships and seeking out mentors (Sullivan, 2000). Citing this, the interviewees reinforced the need for relationships with other people as a source of knowledge and potential forms of development of learning.

Once presented with this broad portrait of the lives of entrepreneurs through the utilization of the life history strategy/method and the thematic interview, we advanced to the exposition of the results which reveal fragments of the learning process in the life journeys of these entrepreneurs who point to the development of EL before they were even involved in an entrepreneurial practice.

4.2 Learning Based on Involvement in Practices during One's Life

A life's journey is an incessant learning process (Hjorth & Johannisson, 2009) and for the startup founders interviewed, it has been no different. Thus, focusing mainly on knowing in practice (Gherardi & Strati, 2014), connecting experiences, which potentially supply a set of learning which have become relevant to being an entrepreneur, we can highlight that various practices are a source of knowledge and they permit individuals to learn and develop entrepreneurial preparedness (Wang, Rafiq, Li, & Zheng, 2014).

In this manner, through participant narratives about their lives and lived experiences, we have explored different moments of knowing in practice which are highlighted by excerpts from the interviews. For example, one participant (E8) mentioned that "my learning…began when I started working with my father when I was 14-years-old." Another participant revealed that, also during the "selling lemonade" phase, while he was in high school, he gained experience making small deals: "learning how to purchase the product [semi-jewels], realizing that it does not sell, becoming stuck, having to sell it below cost, defaulting on payments, feeling pressured to sell, persuading [others to buy], overcoming obstacles, anyway…so I started with this very early" (E14).

In the "formal education" phase, we were surprised by the fact that some of the entrepreneurs did not even try to get an entrepreneurial education, even those who studied business. And even those who had contact with this subject in college did not recognize its form and content as something that had been useful in becoming an entrepreneur. In general there is the recognition of the importance of higher education, but as one participant expressed it: "the value that formal education has had in my life is splendid not because of the syllabus, or what was written in it, but because of the doors it opened" (E19). In another situation, in talking about entrepreneurship, interviewee E5 told us that during college (while studying Production Engineering) he was a member of the student council (and the junior company club), highlighting how important it was to have some kind of practical involvement, for example in the organization of parties promoted by the school board: "We have to have a party, quoting the supplier, planning, setting a schedule; [enterprising] is much closer to having a party promoted by the student union than solving a problem in solids mechanics."

During the "professional experience" phase, learning by practice was also mentioned. For example, there was one entrepreneur (E3) who told us: "I felt that I needed to learn to enterprise" before becoming one, and that is why he decided to gain experience, emphasizing that he would do this "with other people's money." As a result, he began to work in a *startup,* for free, a few hours a day, with the goal of working together with the founder to learn from him and the context of that
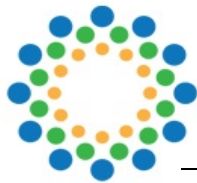
enterprise.[4] Another example which emphasizes practice is participant E17's report, which reveals that he learned accounting by working in a bank, not when he took a course in business administration.

Participant E29 also told us that he gained experience through his first job working with agile methodologies in developing software; and now he uses this knowledge in his role of managing the technology area of a *startup* that he founded with his other partners. These examples show that, independent of the type of activity, the interviewees involved themselves in moments in which gaining knowledge related to a given social practice was important, independent of the type of experience and learning acquired. For example, interviewee E15 in talking about working for a small company affirmed that: "I did everything [there]. I used to make coffee and even had a meeting with presidents of major hotel chains…. So, it was very good for me and nowadays I have this maturity, a perception, to see that this was fundamental for my entrepreneurial development."

As pointed out in the examples above, knowing in practice unfolds based on engagement in certain practices, and can also be the fruit of experience in being involved in a previous entrepreneurial practice. This was the case with entrepreneur E1 who mentioned that today, when he talks with someone about the process of searching for investment to fund an idea, he recalls his previous entrepreneurial experience (in a software house), where the focus was not on seeking outside funding from investors, but rather the development of the largest number of systems possible so that they could sell more and thus have money for the following month. At the same time, he emphasizes how it was important to say "no" to some projects because in his experience, "he knew" (learned) that becoming a *workaholic* would not resolve the financial problems of the company, because each new project brought with it new challenges, which the team would have to deal with (and as a consequence would lose valuable time doing so). In the narrative of this interviewee, relating the present to the past, he used the expression "I knew" various times, informing us what he had learned through practical performance.

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[4] Even though another participant (E9) also manifested the desire to gain experience (knowledge and learning) working for a *startup*, he narrated the process of trying and the frustration of not succeeding.

In a similar manner, another *startup* founder emphasized that he had a certain set of knowledge because: "I'd been through this before" (E5), thus suggesting that the involvement in a previous entrepreneurial practice, had given him foresight that helped him prepare his own enterprise. Similarly interviewee E27 pointed out his previous experience in a traditional business, saying that "a lot of what I'm applying today at [name of start-up in healthcare sector] I learned at the restaurant. The restaurant, for me, was the strongest 'MBA' I could have done. If I had pursued an actual MBA, I wouldn't have learned half [of what I learned at the restaurant]."

Other examples (E1, E5 and E27) demonstrated episodes of knowledge in practices linked to a previous entrepreneurial practice, however, the process of learning in practice also occurred in the creation of the current enterprise. Interviewee E2 points this out and narrates a process of recognizing opportunities: when he and a few colleagues applied the concept of a *lean startup* to validate their idea with potential clients, he says he perceived that "there was something there," or in other words, this realization was only possible by virtue of the empirical validation of the idea in question. In this sense, knowing/learning in practice permeates the recognition of an opportunity, the maturation of the idea, and also the step of business development.

Later on, this entrepreneur added that in the process of constructing the enterprise, he and the other partners did not pay attention to some business details, perceiving a gap only when they tried to launch it commercially: "We learned this in practice, if we had looked at this before, it would have been much better, but it is OK, we learned." A similar situation confronted another participant (E3), who revealed launching his business without a revenue model. This recognition of the need to make changes, while the idea is being developed and tested, by virtue of the learning acquired along the way, was also pointed out by another entrepreneur (E6).

Previous experiences and involvement with an entrepreneurial practice (and the experiences that arise due to it) enable entrepreneurs to avoid errors and find

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

122

shortcuts to do things differently and in some cases better. Participant E20, who is an entrepreneur in the field of urban mobility, wonders whether it would have helped him during the period when he was developing his business, to experiment being a driver to be able to talk with his customers and understand what they want from his service, which thus would have enabled him to know beforehand some of the challenges and difficulties that can arise. Given that there is no predictability in certain aspects of being an entrepreneur, the only way to gather knowledge is by "only after you put your hand in the dough (pulling up your sleeves)" as E12 said in the interview. Perhaps this is the reason that E23 also expressed that "if I were to do it again [developing the startup from scratch], I would do it in half the time."

Once again, as pointed out above, the knowing/learning in practice is based on previous experiences and the current involvement in some practice. It is developed while various everyday tasks are being performed, even in practices that can, at first glance, seem like they are not related to the business world. For example participant E23 highlighted that he had become disciplined due to his routines in his tennis and music training. He emphasized that repetition made him realize that he had improved by performing these activities and that the process as a whole developed personal qualities and a mentality that valued persistence.

Other entrepreneurs, namely E2, E3, E5, E19-E24, E26-E29, E31, and E32, also emphasized the contribution of some hobbies, and mainly sports before and during the current entrepreneurial practice as a way of forming useful experiences and knowledge which have proved useful in developing and/or conducting business. This demonstrates how knowing in practice is related to doing something, that is, it requires involvement in a practice, but doing it, in the sense of practice, is not the only way to learn (Gherardi, 2009). This is mainly because the concept of knowing in practice also encompasses learning vicariously through others. An example of this would be reading a book about someone's experiences, an activity that permits access to knowledge and learning that many of the participants (E2, E3, E6, E8, E11, E12, E14, E15, E17, E23, E25-E29, and E31) mentioned during these interviews.
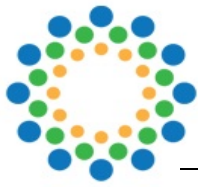
All of the experiences cited up until now are linked to certain social practices, which have helped entrepreneurs know how to do something after having done it themselves, or having read or heard someone talk about their own experiences or even seeing someone perform these practices. Thus, it is possible to learn what you can and what you should do, what works, but also what does not, like the narration of participant E30's statement that "from [an unforeseen] situation, to do things differently next time." In this sense, being aware of what to do – or not to do – is a result that arises from the participation in social practices that provide fertile ground for knowledge. Thus, as revealed by the study's results, the involvement in various practices makes it possible for individuals to develop a wide array of knowledge and learning which trains and prepares them for the entrepreneurial journey, even before they start out.

This is why we emphasize that past experiences play a prominent role in the process of entrepreneurship, even though perhaps they do not always have a direct influence, as we can tell from the report below:

> For a while, my hobby was to paint, paintings and T-shirts, artistic things. This was not my educational background, but I end up taking advantage of my artistic abilities to work on canvas, data spreadsheets, graphic representations and presentations; this is an aesthetic presentation [and artistic ability] that I ended up transferring into my venture (E22).

Therefore, in life's journey, fragments of learning appear to the extent that current entrepreneurs engage in various social practices and develop knowledge from these experiences. This knowledge in certain cases has been relevant to entrepreneurial preparedness, opportunity recognition, and the conducting of their current enterprises.

5 Final Considerations

Telling stories is part of human nature, but rather than just relating experiences, it also contributes to the understanding of social processes, such as learning. In this manner, this study proposes that, based on the oral history of the lives of startup founders and the use of thematic interviews with these entrepreneurs,

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.
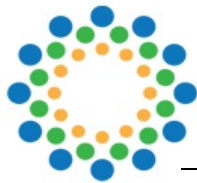
124

it has been possible to generate narratives that reveal learning processes that occurred before the current enterprises that they are engaged in. We argue that the oral history of life provides narratives that make it possible to connect life with the participants' individual stories in seeking to understand the learning construction process, especially entrepreneurial learning.

Thus, using the lens of a practice approach as a theoretical perspective, this work presents oral life histories as a methodological possibility for studies of entrepreneurial learning in order to suggest a research agenda that uses this strategy/method in the investigation of the learning processes experienced by entrepreneurs during their lifetimes. We also recommend that thematic stories be used in a complementary manner with life histories, because they amplify the generation of narratives that help researchers in the construction of reports that point out episodes in which learning has occurred due to their participation in social practices and, as a result, in certain activities.

Based on the argument that oral histories can be considered a strategy as well as a methodological possibility, when used as a research method, we point out that the narratives that result from this method point out fragments of learning that occur with the involvement in certain social practices. Thus, for the treatment of data collection, the narrative analysis is considered a possible way of accessing knowledge and learning. And, although practices-based studies are known as a post-humanist approach, to the extent that they eliminate the central focus on human beings in the process of seeking to find a rupture with dualities which splinter the social world, we argue that human agents are indispensable to making academic study viable and supplying information about their experiences, especially in the case of historical research over a long period of time.

Based on the empirical application of the proposed research methodology, even though the life history of each entrepreneur is unique, the results reveal that we can understand their lives over time as being composed of four main phases: "selling lemonade," "formal education," "professional experience" and "previous

Rev. Empreendedorismo Gest. Pequenas Empres. | São Paulo, v.8 | n.3 | p. 99-133 | Set/Dez. 2019.

125

entrepreneurial practices." In examining these phases we identified engagement with various practices, and given that social practices are considered a source of learning, we found recognized learning processes which are relevant to current entrepreneurial practice.

The research agenda that we are suggesting and proposing with the implementation of the offered methodological propositions is in line with what Wang et al. (2015, p. 236) suggest when they affirm that "more research is necessary to understand how entrepreneurs learn in real life and prepare themselves for the challenges of entrepreneurship," even though, up until now, with the efforts made to get an understanding of how entrepreneurs learn, there still remains an empirical gap to reveal the various contexts in which entrepreneurs learn and prepare themselves for entrepreneurship.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of researchers to develop studies that will fill in the existing gaps and provide answers to the understanding of entrepreneurial learning. This is why this article cites the recommendation that oral life histories and thematic interviews can contribute as facilitating tools for future researchers who are interested in revealing entrepreneurial learning processes, not just in the past activities before current entrepreneurial practices, but also during the process of being an entrepreneur and running a business.

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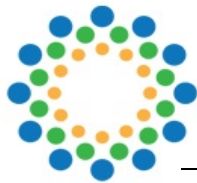
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127

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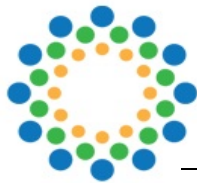
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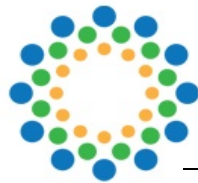
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133