

## “Life statements” of people convicted by the Inquisition in New Spain

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### ABSTRACT

*Some records from the Inquisition in New Spain contain a large amount of “life statements”, short biographical narrations about people brought before the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition. The aim of this article is to determine if these statements, along with any additional information they include, constitute “life histories” as they are conceived in the autobiographical method. Based on the characteristics of these records, we present several ways to reshape them as life histories, and we emphasize their importance for the valuable information they provide about their ideological and social historical context, while also allowing us to approach different micro historical aspects of the daily lives of people living during the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which we can hardly learn about through panoramic views of history.*

**Keywords:** *life statements, life histories, Inquisition of New Spain, Viceroyalty of New Spain*

### INTRODUCTION

Life histories are framed as a qualitative method of data recollection within the biographical genre, specifically in autobiographies. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chicago School pioneered this method for investigation in social sciences, and even though it struggled against positivist methods, it gained recognition halfway through the century. However, we can trace examples of life histories back to antiquity, such as *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, written in 99 CE, which is considered canonically as the first autobiography, followed by *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. The term “lives” is also found in works of several classic authors, such as *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius, *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch, and *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius. The use of the term “lives” is noteworthy because the Greeks “never used the term ‘biography,’ but ‘lives’” (Moreno & Soto, 2017). The genre flourished in the Middle Ages with the abundant production of biographies of numerous Saints, so it is no surprise that we can find atypical forms of these life histories in the Inquisition records and archives published during the Viceroyalty of New Spain (16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries).

As Fumaroli (as cited in Dosse, 2011) says, writing “lives” was the norm from Antiquity to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and then the biography became the norm, fundamentally changing the selection of “great men, those who got to have biographies” (p. 16). But Martín-García (1995) points out “the use of life histories and, in general, the qualitative method did not begin until the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the stewardship of two scientific views with evident similarities: cultural anthropology, and qualitative sociology” (p. 44).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent quotations from sources in Spanish were translated into English for the purposes of this article.

The objective of this article is to show the variety of life-history modes that can be obtained from materials found in some records from the Mexican Inquisition, as well as to show the usefulness in reconstructing life histories from “life statements” and informative fragments on the lives of individuals who faced the Inquisition for different reasons, and who were registered in the files of the processes they were subjected to. This usefulness will be exemplified with the “life statements” that give us a closer look at the Viceroyalty of New Spain, and different aspects related to atypical behaviors that deviated from the canons of the time, leading several people to be accused before the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition.

These life “statements” and fragments from the Inquisition yield the following questions: Is it possible to derive life histories from fragmentary information in the archives and records of the Inquisition, according to the tenets of the genre? How are they similar to or different from current formats? Does the fact that they come from judicial documents make the statements more truthful? Which traits of these life histories increase their multifunctional value? How can we classify these life statements and fragments?

## **METHOD**

We use the comparative method in order to show inherent characteristics of “life statements” found in the archives and records of the Inquisition which can be translated into *sui generis* “life histories” in comparison to prototypical “life histories,” especially considering that, despite the temporal distance between them, share some traits in their different forms of elaboration based on current approaches.

For this article, we use the concept of “life history” based on the definition proposed by Bernabé Sarabia (1985), which says:

In its broad sense, the term “life histories” has covered autobiographies, which are defined as narrations of lives by those who have lived them, or reports from subjects talking about their own lives, as well as biographies, which are narrations whose subject are not their main authors. (p. 171)

For the purposes of this investigation, the most adequate definition for the biographical materials found in the archives and records of the Inquisition is expressed by the same author further ahead:

We consider “life histories” both the accounts of an entire life as well as partial accounts of certain periods or biographical moments. Furthermore, it is important to mention that the term does not cover the narration alone, for it also encompasses all accumulated information on the life being studied; information found in school records, health records, etc., and, obviously, the analysis work done by the investigator(s). (p. 171)

After presenting the characteristics of the “life statements” analyzed, we present different ways to reformulate them as “life histories” with the information found in the archives and records of the Inquisition. Even though there are no studies on “life statements”, there is a great deal of literature on “life histories” that we can use to sustain the analysis we are presenting.

## **RESULTS**

The “life statements” analyzed in this article come from judicial records found in the archives of the Inquisition, which was “both an ecclesiastic and judicial tribunal” (Junco, 1983, p. 43).

Though the main goal of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of New Spain was to persecute heresy, its field of action eventually grew. As Herrera Sotillo (2015) says, “actually, their

jurisdiction was much larger, as it began to include all acts that could constitute a form of danger (sometimes real, sometimes imaginary) to the purity of faith" (p. 74), which led to an increase in power and control over the population. This amount of power generated records which, nowadays, yield a wide variety of information in colonial times in New Spain, for they offer a broad view that we would otherwise not have access to, but it is important to remember they are mediated by the perspective of an inquisitorial institution.

The archives and records were produced in accordance with judicial processes, which were carried out against any individual who had been accused or reported before the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition or who had been persecuted by the inquisitors' own initiative who, "in the pursuance of their duty, played the role of judges" (Ayllon, 2002, §1).

Once the report was made, and the evidence was gathered, the Inquisitors would hold the first audience with the defendants and interrogated them. The Inquisitors would ask for their name, place of origin, marital status, place of residence, and work, information which constitutes what nowadays is considered as identity data. In case of a crime of heresy, defendants were also questioned about their ancestry, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles—both on their father's side and their mother's side—, their parents, siblings, spouse, and children. They were also asked if they were baptized and confirmed Christians, if they attended mass, and if they received communion in accordance with the Church's times and methods.

Afterward, they were asked to provide their "life statement", which was a brief section found in some of the archives and records from the Inquisition, which contains the life narration that the defendant provides when asked by the Inquisitorial prosecutor; however, it is such a brief account that, in most cases, it is not possible to liken it to a life history as we understand it nowadays. Here we show an example of the "life statement" of Agustina Rangel (1684), a woman accused of falsehood, swindling, superstition, blasphemy, sorcery, and heresy.

-Interrogated on the topic of her life statement [the curandera <sup>2</sup> Agustina Rangel]

-She declares, as previously stated, that she was born in the town of Zinapécuaro, and was brought from there to the city of Valladolid at a young age, until she married with the aforementioned Nicolás López, who took her to the town of Zenzonza [possibly Tzinzunzan] a few leagues away from said city, and that then he brought her here, and that she has no recollection of ever being or going anywhere else. She also declares she only had contact and interaction with her relatives and other respectable citizens. (f. 146r) <sup>3</sup>

This "life statement" could be considered as an equivalent to a "life history fragment" which, albeit very briefly, functions as a seed, as the starting point to produce a life history, since it is possible to add more information to the statement: information provided by the accuser, testimonies provided by witnesses who were interrogated prior to the first hearing, identity data provided by the defendant, as well as information provided by the staff of the Holy Tribunal as a last resort.

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<sup>2</sup> In Spanish, a person who provided spiritual and physical cures with ritualistic or natural methods without holding a medical degree.

<sup>3</sup> Original statement in Spanish: Dijo que como lleva declarado nació en el pueblo de Zinapécuaro y de ahí la trajeron a la ciudad de Valladolid de tierna edad a donde ha estado, hasta que se casó con el dicho Nicolás López, quien la llevó al pueblo de Zenzonza [posible Tzinzunzan] a unas leguas de dicha Ciudad y que luego la trajo a ella aquí y que no se acuerda de haber estado ni haber salido a otra parte. Y que su trato y comunicación ha sido con sus parientes y otras personas honradas de la ciudad. (f. 146r)

In the accuser's declaration, several people are recognized as witnesses of the facts provided. Usually, they were relatives, friends, or acquaintances of the defendant, that is, people in his/her primary circle or who had contact with the defendant for several reasons. The list could grow with names of people mentioned by those witnesses, and everyone was brought to declare before the Holy Tribunal during the trial. Their accounts, though very repetitive in relation to the accusations and the declarations made by other witnesses, provided certain data or different perspectives, i.e., they added details about what had been said by the accuser or even the defendant, and sometimes they even provided new information. The compilation of these declarations from multiple voices constituted a life history that could also be enriched with fragments of other life histories complimentary to the main one. Therefore, the judicial process of the Tribunal offered in the end a complex life history.

It is noteworthy that not all records have the same wealth of information; however, given the historical distance between colonial times in New Spain and our present day, all data and reference to daily life back then is valuable.

While most "life statements" were short, there are some larger instances such as those collected by the Inquisition on Jewish people who arrived in New Spain and who were brought before the Inquisition on accounts of Judaization. For example, we show the statement provided in the famous case of Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, who was the governor of the Spanish province of Nuevo León in present-day Mexico:

-Interrogated on the topic of his life statement.

-He declares he was born in the aforementioned municipality of Mogadouro, and there he attended school until the age of eight, when he left with his father to the town of Sahagún to see the Abbot, who was his father's debtor, and also to Salamanca to work for his father, who was ill. [He also declares] his father died in Benavente, and the aforementioned Duarte de León took him to Lisbon, and then sent him for three months to the islands of Cape Verde where he stayed for 13 years, and worked as Treasurer and Accountant of the King of Portugal, // period after which he moved to Lisbon, and then to Seville, where he married the aforementioned doña Guiomar de Rivera, his wife, with whom he lived in marriage for two years. [He also declares] he got lost during a trade of wheat and came here to New Spain through islands with a ship of wine that he sold through his colonists in Vera cruz, México, and Zacatecas, and he remained her for ten years until he returned to Spain and remained in Pánuco, in a state of large livestock he bought from don Lope de Sosa, with Captain Sebastián Rodríguez, and then he was employed by Viceroy don Martín Enriquez as Captain and Peacemaker in the land of Pánuco and Mazapil, and after going to Spain ten years ago, as previously mentioned, His Majesty appointed him Governor and General Captain of the New Kingdom of León for the rest of his days and those of an heir appointed by himself. [He also declares] he has spent the last ten years conquering and pacifying said land until now that Viceroy Marqués de Villa Manrique has brought him and imprisoned him, and has not visited other foreign kingdoms nor has he studied any skills, for he knows nothing more than reading and writing. (Toro, 1982, pp. 280-281)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Original statement in Spanish: Dijo que nació en la dicha villa de Mogodorio y allí se crió yendo a la escuela hasta la edad de ocho años, que fue con su padre a Sahagún a ver al Abad que era su deudo y también a Salamanca a servir a su padre, que estaba enfermo, y luego murió su padre en Benavente y el dicho Duarte de León, que vino allí, lo llevó a Lisboa de donde lo envió luego de allí a tres meses a Cabo Verde, en cuya isla estuvo 13 años, y allí fue Tesorero y Contador del Rey de Portugal // y a cabo de ellos se vino a Lisboa, y de ahí a Sevilla, donde se casó con

It is essential to know the historical, political, economic, and social context in which these life fragments were captured to understand the key dynamics of the defendants, and to understand how deviant conducts were perceived by the accusers and the Holy Tribune.

For instance, the religious environment was controlled by the Catholic Church. According to Mayer (2012), “religion was prioritized as the main element of policy of state and as guiding principle of other social sectors (extending beyond politics to society, economy, culture), which led to the circulation and institutionalization of new norms based on an ecclesiastic project” (p. 18)

The only religion in force was the Catholic, which effectively reshaped the consciousness of the native peoples of Mexico, and it was reinforced by the active presence of missionaries; their main task was not only to permeate catholic dogma across native society, but also to sustain the spiritual needs of all inhabitants of New Spain, including Spaniards, Creoles, and mixed-race people; in other words, people from every single social stratum.

The entire infrastructure of the Catholic church—both in New Spain and across Europe—was carefully planned to have a permanent impact on the minds of its parishioners. The building of churches, the infinity of religious imagery, the sermons, the appeals made by priests, the recurring religious holidays, and the religious ceremonies practiced since childbirth imposed the Church on the lives of people starting from birth: baptism, matrimony, funerals, Christmas, Holy Week, etc. In consequence, ideas, beliefs, devotions, and religious practices were ever-present in the lives of people.

Nonetheless, these efforts do not imply absolute uniformity among the population as to how people perceived the Catholic religious imaginary, since there were many nuances in New Spain. Quezada (2000) explains:

[There were] different views of the world coexisting in New Spain, a multiethnic and multicultural society, since each ethnic group had their own; the Middle American, with its variants; ethnic groups with African roots or Spanish roots too; and the syncretic group that was developed through miscegenation and cultural hybridization throughout in colonial times. (p. 77)

Social structure in colonial times, with its numerous strata, led to extensive class gradation, most notably of indigenous peoples and all races that surged from miscegenation. Religious and ideological hybridization in New Spain was complex. This was a society with no freedom of religion where Spaniards, mixed-race people, and Creoles would inherit Catholicism from childbirth, while foreigners had their own religions and customs.

Schwaller (as cited in Cárdenas & Chávez, 2015) emphasizes the Catholic church’s influence on collective consciousness, politics, economy, and society:

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la dicha doña Guiomar de Rivera su mujer con quien vivió casado como dos años y habiéndose perdido en una contratación de trigo, vino a esta Nueva España por (islas) con un navío de vinos y que se vendieron por sus encomenderos en la Vera cruz, México y Zacatecas, y en esta tierra se quedó hasta hará diez años que volvió a España entreteniéndose en Pánuco, en una hacienda de ganado mayor que compró de don Lope de Sosa, en compañía del Capitán Sebastián Rodríguez, y el Virrey don Martín Enríquez le ocupó en oficio de Capitán y Pacificador de esta tierra hacia Mazapil e ido a España hará los dichos diez años Su Majestad lo proveyó por Gobernador y Capitán General del Nuevo Reino de León por sus días y de un heredero cual nombrase, y en el se ha entretenido conquistando y pacificando aquel reino, hasta que ahora que el Virrey Marqués de Villa Manrique, le mandó traer preso a esta cárcel de corte, donde al presente estaba, y no ha salido a otros reinos extraños ningunos ni ha estudiado ninguna facultad, ni sabe más que leer y escribir.

<sup>5</sup> In the source in Spanish, the author uses “narratario”.

The Catholic church became such a powerful institution that it organized and managed assets in the financial sphere, not only in religious matters, their main concern, but beyond social actions and the spiritual. In turn, its presence and impact were insidious: its power over New Spain had the three great conditions to exert power: to be important, to be dominant, and to be influential. That way, it could configure the culture of Mexican people who, because of their idiosyncrasies, were malleable. (p. 86)

With the amount of power exerted on practically everyone in colonial society, the church naturally had control over the consciousness and conducts of people through different means, one of which was the Holy Tribunal of the Inquisition, which spread propaganda through commissioners, family members, and a variety of decrees read by priests to their parishioners in order to generate accusations including details of acts of heresy. Accordingly, the Inquisition managed to convince Catholics they had a duty to report any kind of heresy they witnessed.

Pressure and fear led people to stand before the Holy Tribunal and accuse people of different actions, sayings, behaviors, beliefs, or practices that could be deemed heretic. The sense of obligation toward the Inquisition would lead them to make accusations even if they were against their relatives, friends, or people who had somehow helped them (including, for instance, healing). Usually, when making the accusation, they indicated they did it to unburden themselves, though they also did it on several occasions out of enmity. Some people would even report their own misdeeds. Upon reviewing the behaviors, practices, and desires of the accusers and defendants, the core values of society during the viceroyalty are underscored.

To fully understand the “statements” and life fragments, it is important not to dissociate them from social institutions dominating New Spain, as well as from the norms of the time though which we can contextualize these records, and the deviant behavior that brought people before the Inquisition. Seeing the whole picture leads to understanding each social group and the society they belonged to.

Additionally, we must underline the amount of information provided by these records on aspects of cultural adaptation failure regarding different elements of the native culture that survived despite cultural impositions of the colonists. These surviving elements—from the merge of multiple native cultures—were seen in behaviors deemed deviant. They survived even in hybrid form despite inquisitorial control, repression, cultural change imposition, and punishment for being different. Spanish dominion did not manage to fully erase some aspects of native culture, and these records bring to light the conflicts that remained during interactions between different social spheres and strata.

That said, as the information collected by the Holy Tribunal has limitations when it comes to what researchers can use for their work, other documents and information about the historical period offer a necessary aid.

Naturally, life conditions and specifics of each individual’s biography development determines how each history is framed, making it unique, regardless of which social class the person belonged to, or their work, or what crimes they committed, even if others share the same traits. Therefore, narrations found in the archives and records of the Inquisition allow to pursue biographical studies with different perspectives and procedures.

## **DISCUSSION**

“Life statements” and fragments previously described can be repurposed and life histories because of the diversity of current formats of the autobiography genre, depending on the use researchers want to give them.

As we mentioned, life fragments found in the archives were collected through the inquisitorial process of the Holy Tribunal, which can be equated to the interview method because the accused narrates aspects of his/her life following a standard interrogation based on legal forms established by the Tribunal. During interviews, a notary, or “in some cases, two members of the Church” (Fernández, 1999, p. 125) would transcribe everything said by the accused, without taking into account emotional information that are usually captured through key punctuation marks. Once the case was resolved, the file included numerous transcripts of interviews to everyone involved in the process conducted by the attorney, which would be the equivalent of what González-Monteagudo (2010) calls “zero-version” of the transcript (p. 13). Anyone attempting to develop a life history from these documents must consider these characteristics.

Therefore, the researcher, for starters, deals with material that can be transformed into a life history, but it has been pre elaborated in this case by the attorney of the Inquisition who conducted “interviews” for the purposes of a judicial process because the subject violated specific cultural norms of the time period.

Now we present some possible procedures to develop life histories from fragments found in archives and records from the Inquisition.

A life history can be obtained from a single case. In this method, according to Martín García (1995), we emphasize “the importance of the ruling of the case or unique cases, aiming to understand the behavior, not to quantify it, categorize it, or classify it” (p. 46). For this case, the interview is the best method given that, as we have already said, the attorneys of the Inquisition would “have been made it” by then. Here, the researcher must define the areas of interest and use other relevant documents to have sufficient information to produce a life history.

Another option is to develop multiple life histories focused on a single aspect or topic, based on the work of the accused (curanderos, midwives, mule drivers, smiths, soldiers, servants, cobblers, to name some examples found in the files), their crimes (sorcery, superstition, blasphemy, violation, bigamy, solicitation, use of peyote, divination, and pacts with the devil, to name a few), their social stratum, or other specific areas that can be used as focal points of analysis.

Another possible use of these records is with Elder’s (1994) life-course approach: “unlike the focus on single careers, so widely studied in the past, the life course perspective offers a framework for exploring the dynamics of multiple, interdependent pathways” (p. 5). From this paradigm, we must emphasize the concept of “turning point” which, according to Elder *et al.* (as cited in Blanco & Pacheco, 2003) “makes reference to particularly significant moments of change; events or transitions that produce major changes which, in turn, lead to sharp direction changes in the life course” (p. 3). This aspect of Elder’s theory is important in developing life histories of people accused before the Holy Tribunal because the trial itself is a turning point in their lives and the lives of their families. In fact, it was a point of no return, be it for reputation damages, long periods of time spent in prison, public punishments, or death in prison. Whatever their fate after the accusation, they were forever marked in the eyes of society, even after death. However, any other principles of Elder’s method can be applied; as Blanco (2011) points out, the main goal of this approach is “to analyze how historical events and economic, demographic, social, and cultural changes mold and configure both

individual lives or groups such as cohorts or generations” (p. 6). With this outlook, the archives and records of the Inquisition offer an endless number of possibilities to generate long-term cohorts that yield panoramic information on different aspects of life between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Another possibility is treating the records as “life stories” according to Bertaux’s (2005) approach:

There is a life story from the moment a subject tells another person—researcher or not—any episode of their life experience. The verb “to tell” (narrate) is essential here: it means the discourse production of a subject has adopted a *narrative* form. (p. 36)

Cornejo, Mendoza & Rojas (2008) say the life story corresponds to oral or written statements done by narrators about their lives or part of them (p. 30). They add that when it comes to the sense of the narration in the production of a life story, we can say it does not belong neither to the narrator or the *narratee*”<sup>(5)</sup> (p. 31), The *narratee* is defined by De Villers (as cited in Cornejo *et al.*, 2008, p. 31) as “the hearer,” and by Legrand (as cited in Cornejo *et al.*, p.31) as “the expert in life stories”. This approach can be used to reconstruct “statements” and life histories from New Spain by substituting the first *narratee* or hearer with the attorney; the second, with the person who consults the inquisitorial information and acts as an active reader—instead of a listener—of the account provided by the accused, complementing the information with other documents relevant for the research, taking into account Pineau’s (as cited in Cornejo, 2008, p. 31) observations that the narratee “must approach the life experiences of the narrator, open up to their quotidian language, and leave behind his/her own conceptual systems”. In this view, we can develop life histories with unique takes.

A peculiarity of these life-history documents is that their structure, dependent on inquisitorial processes, makes them also useful for developing what Lejeune (as cited in Pujadas 2000, pp. 144-145) “life histories from multiple accounts”, which Porier *et al.* (as cited in Pujadas, 2000, p. 145) describes as “a look from multiple angles at a single object, which normally comes from a social formation of small geographic dimensions”. Life fragments from the archives can be transformed into polyphonic histories with several voices at once that accompany that of the defendant, coming from witnesses and the accuser, which could yield a more truthful account of specific events or life details, i.e. a more complete vision which provides information on other life histories, and contrasts the different group perceptions surrounding the defendant. Another modality within this perspective is using the information from the archives for parallel life histories, “a kind of procedure that uses biographical narrations when the object of study covers large socio-demographical units” (Pujadas, 2000, p. 145). Here, instead of using a single trial case as a source, researchers can use as many files from defendants who committed the same crime or other variables as desired. This type of accounts, like the ones used with Elder’s life-course approach, can offer long-term panoramic studies with conclusions that could prove valuable for the studied theme.

Finally, within the wide range of ways to re-elaborate statements found in inquisitorial records, authors can develop biographies, with greater freedom to create, to accentuate historical or literary aspects depending on the approach, to provide different nuances, or to combine genres. As Quintanilla (2014) says, “the biographical work can be found at the juncture of history and literature” (p. 5).

## CONCLUSION

In short, we can say that repurposing “life statements” and other life fragments found in inquisitorial records from New Spain as life histories in any of the modalities of biographical

work can produce organized texts depending on the approach chosen by the researcher. These “life statements” can be turned into more structured information sources than when found in the records alone, and with greater value for multiple disciplines. When used as life histories, they can contribute to inter and trans disciplinary research within social sciences that offers deep reflection of a historical moment, or even for artistic production.

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