

Chapter II

SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND INTERACTION

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NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS - A NEW TOOL
FOR SOCIOLOGICAL FIELD RESEARCH

1. What is a Narrative Interview?

Most textbooks of sociological methodology agree that an interview in social sciences is a game of question and answer: the interviewer is prepared to ask a set of more or less defined questions and the informant is supposed to answer them one after the other. The main differences between several forms of interviews lie in the form of communication - is it an oral interview or a questionnaire - and in the degree to which the interviewer has to stick to predefined formulations of his questions: in "open interviews" the interviewer has the freedom to arrange the sequence of the questions and to vary the formulation of his questions according to situational conditions. In all forms of conventional interviews the interviewer asks questions concerning topics which were defined before the interview, because they were regarded as theoretically relevant for the field of objects that is under question.

Some assumptions underly this "classical" form of interviewing: first, it is assumed that the researcher poses his questions in an adequate way, this in a double sense: adequate to the normal speech that the informant understands and speaks and adequate to the matter in question. The second assumption is, that the reser-

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cher already has information on what the relevant topics are. And thirdly it is assumed that the questions are not context-sensitive, that means, the batteries of questions are designed in a way the they have the same meaning for people in different contexts or: all interviewees live in the same context and are asked in the same situation. It can be doubted that these assumptions are "true" for most investigations. First: it is well known that there are important differences in the meaning of words and phrases in the different sub-cultures of a society. The second point is even more serious: one can doubt with good reasons that a researcher has enough theoretical knowledge on a field to put all the relevant questions for the object of his research - and in case he has gotten all information, what is left to ask? And finally it can be doubted that the assumption of context-independent questions or context-homogeneous informants can be true. At least the biographical context of the informants is - nearly in all studies - different, and so are the meanings of questions in the light of the biographical context.

A radically different form of interview that tries to overcome these shortcomings of classical interviews (at least for a certain area of social research) is the "Narrative Interview". In this kind of interviews people are stimulated to tell their stories of self-lived experiences (Schütze). This kind of interviewing was initiated by Schatzmann and Strause (1966) in a study on the experience of natural catastrophes and it was developed by Schütze (1975, 1976, 1977, 1983), who created the concept of narrative interviews which is presented here, with some additional extensions and some experiences of my own.

In narrative interviews, it was said, the informant is stimulated to tell his story of self lived experiences. During the main part of the interview the interviewer is just a listener, he is not "allowed" to interrupt the informant and to put questions. The subject of a narrative interview can only be events, the informant has experienced by his own and which can be told as a narrative. The subject of most of the narrative interviews, the "Kassel group" of Schütze has made, was the life history of the informant or at least aspects of the life history, as for instance the history of his professional life ("focussed biographical interview", for example Hermanns, Tkocz, Winkler, 1984). Other

subjects of a narrative interview can be the experience of natural catastrophes (S o h a t z m a n n, S t r a u s s, 1966) or process of organizational change in a community (fusion of communities into new administrative units) (S c h ü t z e, 1975, 1976, 1977). As the main aspect of a narrative interview is the narrative itself, the informant can only be stimulated to tell things, that can be told in the form of a narrative: the sequences of singular events and the "tableau of action" (S c h ü t z e, 1975) of the people taking part in these events. What cannot be told as a narrative are static phenomena and steadily ongoing routinized processes without any change - these you can describe but you cannot tell them as a story. A story has a beginning, the situation as it has been before at a certain point of time, then something is happening and changing the situation and finally the story has an end, the situation as it is now (or at the time, when the story ends). You cannot tell the story how you tie your shoelaces - you can describe this, but you can tell the story how you once missed the train, because your shoelaces split and you lost time by fixing them.

2. Story-Telling in narrative interviews and in everyday-life

Telling stories of self-lived experience is a form of communication everybody knows and everybody is competent in. Storytelling in everyday-life always has a function for the people engaged in by either telling or listening. Such a function of story-telling can be entertainment on a party, it can be finding out, how an accident did happen, or it can be to show somebody what kind of person one is. People engaged in a conversation tend to agree (more or less) on a common scheme of action - for example entertainment, bringing light in the causes of an accident or presentation of a personality. The function of telling stories is always dependent on the scheme of action people agreed on. All episodes of a story, all background-explanations describing situations, procedures or people, all argumentations, all expressions of values are "selected" by the story-teller within the framework of the

overlaying scheme of action and it is interpreted by the listener in the same framework. If for instance in a narrative interview the presentation of the biography is agreed on as the overlaying scheme of action, then the informant organizes the selection and the presentation of events according to that scheme. This does not mean, that every word of the informant is of particular relevance for the biography, telling stories is a process that is partially autonomous of the overlaying scheme of action: you can be so heavily engaged in telling that you come from one point to the next and lose the idea of what you intended to say. If that happens, an informant telling the story of his life, has to mark the relevance of these digressions, for example by saying that one wanted to mention that just "by the way" and that one now returns back to the original track.

During the phase when the informant is telling his story, the interviewer is not allowed to interrupt him or her, because it is of great importance that the narrator has complete freedom in organizing his story in his own way. The interviewer must not disturb the logic of the story by putting questions. In a narrative it might happen for instance that an informant is telling episodes on - for example - prestige problems he suffers in his work without giving a detailed information what his work actually is. It would be quite adequate for the interviewer in a classical interview to ask for more details on the informants work. This is not so for a narrative interview because this intervention of the interviewer would bring up a new topic (workprocess) which is in a certain competition with the original topic (prestige problem). The logic of the biographical process as constructed by the informant would be (partially) destroyed when competing schemes of action (describing the work process) are introduced. The informant will be confused by those interventions because he has to oscillate between two tracks: his own idea of his biography and the interests of the interviewer. Thus he cannot be sure that the interviewer is interested in the same thing as he is: his own construction of his biography.

3. The theory of narrative interviews

The most important precondition of a narrative interview is the generation of a narrative, a story of a self-lived experience, not just a selection of episodes. The story must as a whole have the character of a narrative. An "open" interview where from time to time the informant tells an anecdote is definitely not a narrative interview. The story told must have a definite beginning in a certain historical time, it must conceive all the events regarded as relevant for the process that was going on - for instance, in an autobiographical interview all events that are regarded as important for the life and development of the narrator must be mentioned - and the story must end in a certain historical time with a "coda" indicating, that this is the outcome of the process told and the end of the story, often added by an evaluation of what happened.

In his autobiographical narration the informant is completely free. This has often brought up the criticism, that he can tell a story that does not base on history and that he makes up because he wants to be seen by the interviewer in a more favorable way. This argument would be of some importance if there were not several constraints to the making up of a "faked" autobiographical story. Schütze (1975, 1976, 1977) has described three constraints working in narratives preventing the narrator from "being lost in episodes" or from tendencies to make up a fiction, in order to polish his image in the eyes of the listeners. The constraints of the narrative that Schütze describes are the constraints to "close the form", "to condense" and "to go into details". "The informant has to represent the over-all connectedness of the story experienced by him as an episode or an historical configuration of episodes by presenting all important parts of inter-related events in the narrative" (Schütze, 1975, p. 5). To tell the story plausible and credible the narrator has to be oriented towards the historical facts. The constraint to close the form means that once the narrator introduced a person, started to tell about an event, indicated future outcomes of things he is talking about, he is obliged to go on with these topics and "close the form" that was opened by the previous hints: he has to tell

us, how the person mentioned became important for his biography, how the event he was talking about affected his life history and how it came that things turned bad, after the narrator indicated some future changes by mentioning that "it is not all gold that shines". This way "the constraint to »close the form« of the off-hand narrative of self-lived experiences effects the narrative recapitulation of progressively more and more essential episodal parts of the narrator's self experienced story" (S c h ü t z e, 1975, p. 6). While telling his story the narrator feels that he can only make his story plausible and credible if he talks also about events, people, plans of actions and feelings that he originally did not intend to talk about, he feels that he just cannot get through with his story, if he does not mention "the whole thing.

The second constraint, Schütze found out, is the constraint to condense. The narrator of course cannot tell his whole life, because he does not remember everything and because it takes too much time. This makes necessary to select significant events in the life history which are relevant for the story to be told. So the narrator has to make "decisions" which events, actions, experiences in his life are the most relevant for the course of his life, "the narrator is constrained to tell only that which is really relevant as turning points to the all embracing configuration of events - with respect to the proposed theme and the significance the narrator as a person acting and experiencing at the time of his story attributed to possible alternatives of action realized events. This constraint to condense makes the narrator tend to tell only that what is basic to the experienced story and that what is inevitable for understanding the emergence and the consequences of the turning points of events" (S c h ü t z e, 1975, p. 7).

The third constraint, Schütze is talking about, is the constraint to go into details. A story becomes only plausible and credible for a listener, if at least some parts of the story are told in details. The narrator has to take into account the chronology of the historical events, he has to make clear the passage between one event and the next, he must give the listener an impression of the situation and he must characterize the people involved, in order to make their actions plausible and credible. All this makes it necessary for the narrator of a self-experienced sto-

ry to go into details, and he can do this only if he "orients himself to the events and their sequences which are actually self-experienced in the overall historical context. The departure from the factually experienced concatenation of events is only possible, if the narrator has time to prepare a calculated presentation of the story [...]. If the narrator has told about an event A, then he experiences the obligation to also tell about the next important event, which is chronologically and causally following and consistent with the actor's intentions emerging. If he refuses to do this he destroys the causal logic of the sequence of events as well as the intentional logic of respective networks of planning one's own and expecting the others' conduct" (S o h ü t z e, 1975, p. 7).

So the basic assumption of the theory of the narrative interview is that there is a homology between the structure of the organization of experience of the events in life and the structure of the autobiographic narration. This does not mean that we assume, that everything will be told the same way as it has happened. Of course, the informant sometimes might leave out embarrassing events or he might present his role in the course of events in a brighter light than it would be adequate. (A good interviewer may realize such points of lacking plausibility and have some questions on this later on in the interview). Our basic assumption of the homology between structures of experience and narration means for instance that phases in life, as they were experienced in "real time" are also reflected in the text-structure of an interview: phases in life are always introduced by turning-points which are marked in the text, for instance a narrator who joined a new company starts to tell his story as "we", or he marks the turning point by phrases like "and then times became better (or worse)...". Narrative interviews so give us information on the "phasing" of biographies, of the passages that lead from one phase to another, on the driving forces in those phases and from the tableaux of action of people in the different phases of the life of the narrator. And narrative interviews give us also information on the "social worlds" (Strauss) of the informants and on the functioning of the social systems the informants live in.

The strength of the narrative interview is not that it gives us information which in other kind of interviews people would

avoid to give, but that the informant reconstructs the processual logic of events. He does that in two ways. The first and most important is the reconstruction of the processual logic by his presentation of the connectedness of the historical events as told in the story. These connections between singular events can be "intentional-motivational" (one initiates the next event, because it - hopefully - leads to an objective), they can be causal (the next event happened, because of the outcomes of a previous event) and they can be connected by chance (you meet by chance a former colleague at the station and he offers you a new job). The narrator has to connect in his story events in one or the other way and doing this he shows us the dominant relationship between the narrator and the development of his life story as it exists from his point of view of to-day.

The second type of information on the processual logic of events is of a different kind: in the story, the narrator tells, he gives us comments, argumentations, evaluations of a more theoretical type on what his view of today is on the events he presents in the interview. He may explain us, that he did this, because he was too young to know..., or he argues, that this was a situation without choice, or evaluates an event for instance as the best thing that ever happened to him. Amazingly in narrative interviews you can find the fact that there are discrepancies between the narration of the course of events and the more theoretical comments on these events. It can happen that an informant tells the story of a professional career, where his opportunities are gradually decreasing and he comments this with the remark that he was always good in finding new opportunities. This last remark could well be found in a traditional open interview as an answer to the question: "do you think you have problems finding a new job?". In the light of the narration this remark must be interpreted in a different way, for instance as a lacking competence in an adequate evaluation of his standing on the labor market. The advantage of narrative interviews is - beside others - that they have an internal opportunity for differentiating between narrative statements giving information on orientations relevant for action and "ideological" statements giving information on ideas, which are significant for what people think but not for what they do.

4. Making a narrative interview

The main part of a narrative interview is the off-hand story told by the informant. The most important precondition for a successful narrative interview is a setting, that gives the informant the possibility for a spontaneous off-hand story of self-lived experience. The most critical point in a narrative interview is the phase before the informant starts his story. In this Phase I (Starting-Phase) a certain confidence between interviewer and informant has to be established, because telling an autobiographical story is a very personal thing; you can do this also to a stranger, but there has to be a certain "atmosphere" between the two people, interviewer and informant, a little sympathy and a little confidence. This "atmosphere" can (and in some cases it cannot) be established by small-talk, things you can talk about which do not belong to the topic of the interview. In case a certain atmosphere has come up between the two people Phase II (Phase of stimulating a narration) begins: the stimulation of a narration. In this phase the interviewer has to explain that the narrative interview that he wants to make does not work like a classical interview in the question-manner. He has to make clear to the informant that he is interested in a very personal story on what the informant has experienced himself. The interviewer has to assure the informant that his personal story is, what the interviewer is interested in. He is not asked as a representative of a social group which is the subject of the research (for instance as a representative of a professional group, of an age group and so on), he is not asked what generally happens to engineers (if he is an engineer) or to students (if he belongs to that group), but he is asked as an individual and what interests is his very personal experience. That is what he can tell us as a story. This will only happen, if the stimulus the interviewer gives, is a narrative stimulus. That means, the stimulus must stimulate a narrative, a story, a whole of events, with a starting point somewhere fixed in time, lots of things that happened and a final point in time. It would be contra-productive if the interviewer would ask for motives ("Tell me why you became a teacher!" Or even worse: "Tell me how the profession of medical doctors changed during the last

place (for instance: in the beginning the informant says he has been a full time student in 1960 and afterwards he says that he finished his studies and worked as an engineer since 1958). Another point of lacking plausibility is, when the informant does not "close a form", that means, when he introduces people as important and afterwards they do not appear anymore, or when the informant leaves a gap between two events and does not give any information of the connection of the two events. This is often done in a hidden way by a "temporal" connection (for instance: an informant tells us that he works in company A, and then he continues "two years later, I worked in company B at that time, I was promoted..." In this case it is not plausible what happened to him in A, which events led to the change of job). Another point of lacking plausibility is when an informant presents a culminating point in a story as a situation without alternatives. And finally plausibility is lacking, when there are discrepancies in the modality of a presentation and its substance.

After the interviewer in the first part of the phase of additional inquiry exhausted the narrative potential of the informant by giving more narrative stimuli, the second part can begin, where the interviewer asks the informant for "theoretical" comments on his autobiographical story. In this part the interviewer can ask all the questions which he was not allowed to put so far: he can ask "why...", "how did you feel...", "what were your intentions", "what is in general...", "how does... work?", "what is normally the process of...".

There is - mostly - a Phase V (Ending-Phase) in narrative interviews, where the interviewer has no "critical" questions any more. The tape recorder does not run any more and the informant has the possibility of giving "delicate" details (mostly delicate for institutions, not for him) in a confidential manner. This phase has the function of "normalizing" the conversation again, the interviewer now can tell stories of his own, it is a phase of small talk. In cases where the informant has the impression that the interviewer has gotten an unfavorable picture of him, he has now has the opportunity to "rearrange" his image a little bit by giving additional comments or telling more episodes to make clear that he is "smarter" as it had the appearance in the interview.

5. Criteria of quality in narrative Interviews

The most important criteria of the quality of a narrative interview is the occurrence of an extensive main story, which in its internal text-structure is a narrative. Criteria for the narrativity of the story told are the level of indexicality, the staging of detailed passages and the connectedness of the episodes told into a whole. "In narrative texts there is a systematic tendency to keep the system of indexicalities explicit. And therefore one can use explicit indexical expressions to assess the degree of narrativity and action boundness respectively of secondary legitimizing (ideological) character of each of the text passages. So it is possible to differentiate between passages with informative content and passages with »empty formulas« (Leerformeln) on a formal, i.e. strictly observational basis (... and) to decipher their real intent and social function which they have in spite of, or better: on the basis of their quality as being »empty«" (S o h ü t z e, 1975, p. 13). In stories having a high degree of indexicality not only general terms are used but also proper names of persons, places, institutions and things. The second criteria of narrativity in story-telling is the staging of events by imitating the speech of persons, presenting conversations in direct speech or using present time in detailed passages. The third criteria is the connectedness of episodes to a whole. A collection of autobiographical episodes which were stimulated by questions from an interviewer is not an autobiographical narration. Finally the quality of the additional inquiry (phase IV) is dependent of the interviewers competence to detect the points of lacking plausibility during the interview.

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WYWIAD NARRACYJNY - NOWE NARZĘDZIE W BADANIACH
SOCJOLOGICZNYCH

Autor w swym artykule prezentuje konsekwencje wprowadzenia do metodologii wywiadu socjologicznego perspektywy symboliznego interakcjonizmu. "Wywiad narracyjny" ma być taką formą długiej swobodnej rozmowy z badanym, która umożliwia relacjonowanie interesujących badacza faktów z perspektywy przeżywającego je respondenta.