

# NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE OF INTERVIEWING

**Florentina SCÂRNECI-DOMNIŞORU<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *The paper herein submits the narrative technique of the interview. This is a data-collection technique, used in qualitative research, being specific to narrative researches (of the biographical or oral history type). This article presents when it is used, how it is applied and describes concrete contexts of knowledge wherein the author resorted to the narrative interview. It is a technique yielding rich, complex data; leaving the subjects to take control of the interview.*

**Key words:** *qualitative research, narrative research, narrative interview.*

## 1. Introduction

The paper submits the technique of the narrative interview. I will explain how it is applied, in what context, the type of data it produces and why I deem it worthy of being applied in the framework of social researches. Likewise, I will describe how I applied the narrative technique of the interview within various knowledge-production contexts.

In social sciences, in terms of qualitative approach, the narrative inquiry or narrative research has developed. Since the nineties, one can even speak of a current: “the narrative turn in understanding experience”. They refer to data collection as narration (for instance autobiographies, notebooks, letters, field notes etc.) and to their “narrative” analysis. In this paper, I will dwell upon the interviewing technique facilitating the data production in guise of story.

The narrative interview exploits the social-science subjects’ skill to verbally express themselves. However, not giving

them choice-answers in interrogative research situations, but allowing them to speak freely and in unguided manner.

Narrative data have become indispensable in understanding past experiences and events; the subjects’ detailed and vivid descriptions cannot be accessed as efficiently with other research methods and techniques.

## 2. When using the narrative interview

The technique of narrative interview appeared and has developed in the framework of the qualitative approach of socio-humanities. The qualitative research has brought along a new modality to approach the subjects, with less intricate guides, without predefined-answer surveys, with the subjects’ greater freedom to express themselves, with significant restraint of the control by the researcher on the subjects.

The narrative interview is a technique not imposing strict discourse guidelines on the subjects, encouraging them to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Sciences and Communication, *Transilvania* University of Brasov.

ones who decide what and how to recount (see [9]). The technique is mostly used in narrative research (see [5] and [8]): bibliographical research or oral-history research (when the subjects are called upon to narrate life episodes or their entire life, and historical events wherein they took part). In this context, narrative interviews turn into life-story biographical interviews about experienced moments, about individual practices (for instance: choice of conjugal partner, death of a beloved, illness, leisure, first job, university days etc.).

The biographical research stands for “a set of procedures for generating and construing the stories or narrations of the individuals’ lives. [...] The biographical method, also called the life-history methodology, is a generic term for a variety of approaches to the qualitative study that are focused on generating, analyzing and presenting the data of a life-history, of a life-story, on recounting the life experiences, the autobiography or biography” [15, p. 21]. One speaks in socio-humanistic sciences of the “biographical turn”, which means “to raise the use of the biographical-research methods”, and this “effort to unify social theory and biographical experience is called narrative analysis” (p. 22).

And oral history is defined on the site Oral History Association as “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events” (<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>, accessed in 23.03.2013).

Processing narrative texts (inclusively those resulted from the application of the narrative interviews) may be done by applying narrative analyses. Riessman [10] dedicates a volume of Sage Collection – „Qualitative Research Methods Series” to narrative analysis. The author states that “narrative analysis deals with how

protagonists interpret things” and that “we can systematically interpret their interpretations”. Narrative analysis allows “systematically studying personal experience and signification; how events have been constructed by active subjects” (p. 70).

Most interviews in qualitative research are narrative interviews (especially those achieved in early research, when interviews are unstructured; experiences are recounted, opinions are detailed, ideas are explained etc.). Whereas in qualitative research we neither formulate a priori hypotheses, nor have operationalizations, nor use interview guides in the first phase of the study (we do not know what should be asked, what is relevant to ask). Hence we ask our subjects to “recount”.

Therefore narrative interview is used at beginning of qualitative researches (in most of those resorting to the interview as data-collection method) and is the technique specific to the biographical or oral history-type narrative researches.

### 3. How achieving the narrative interview

Rosenthal [11, p. 50] describes this way the sequences of the narrative interview: “Period of main narration” (the interviewer asks the initial narrative question and the interviewee submits the main narration or achieves the self-structured biographical self-presentation) and the “period of questions” (internal-narrative questions – related to already asserted things and external-narrative questions – topics that display interest for us and have not yet been tackled). Bar-On [1] describes this method, concluding that the clarification questions and the questions of interest for the interviewer are subsequent to the main narration.

Wengraf [17, p. 119] describes the “biographic – narrative – interpretative interviewing method” which has three sub-sessions: 1. The interviewer asks a single initial question – formulated so as to bring

about the narration; 2. The interviewer asks for more stories about the themes tackled in the initial narration, following the order in which they were dealt with and resorting to the interviewee's words; now other topics of interest may emerge, which will be subsequently approached; 3. After a preliminary analysis of the materials collected hitherto, questions may be asked on unmentioned topics, which may have nothing to do with the narration.

To achieve narrative interviews supposes to prepare a single question before entering the field. This one is called "generative" or narrative by some experts and it must "generate" the story, stimulate the subjects to speak (see [6] and [3]). The role of this question is to suggest the rules of narrative interviewing to the subjects: they are called upon to unveil experiences by recounting them, they decide what is important to recount, not the interviewer. In order to convey these information, the generative question is usually longer (possibly consisting of several sentences), is formulated with story touch; the subjects are told that the interviewer is not in a hurry, (s)he has time to listen, (s)he is interested in the smallest details and that the question makes no reference to specific topics, does not clearly specify what the subjects should tackle, does not guide at all.

Here are some examples of narrative questions:

- "I want you to tell me how your life story has unfolded. The best way to do this is to start with your birth, childhood, and then to recount all things that have happened one after another so far. There is no need for you to rush, please give details, because I am interested in everything important for you" [6, p. 99].

- "think about your life (past, present and future) as if it were a novel. Most novels are divided into chapters. Divide your life into chapters, give each chapter a name and epitomize each" [3, p. 68].

- "please tell me your life story. I am interested in all your life. Anything you can remember. Take as long as you want. I will no longer ask questions henceforth. I will only take notes on the things I would like to ask you about later. If we do not have time today, maybe in the second interview" [11, p. 50].

As narrative interviewing is not very common for subjects, when they do the right thing, they are encouraged with feedback such as: "this is exactly what I expect from you." or "it is perfect! These are exactly the kind of data I need". Throughout the interview, the interviewer shows the subject (s)he is interested in the story, is attentive and (s)he confirms through vertical head movements that the interviewee is to the point. The interviewer occasionally says "very interesting" or "uh-huh", "aha" and permanently keeps eye contact with the subject. These are recommended with a view to challenging and encouraging the subject to recount, to maintain the narrative direction of the interviewing.

In general, the questions in the rest of the narrative interview are rather clarification questions (being strictly related to what the subject recounts in order to clarify what (s)he says, not to leave unclear the events, phenomena, ideas (s)he describes); they do not guide the respondent towards themes (s)he has not approached, only develop and deepen those (s)he tackled without being challenged. Therefore, clarification questions are formulated on the spot, relating only to an idea issued by the subject. In most cases, these questions require from the subject to give more details, to specify what (s)he refers to or to clarify what (s)he meant. The interviewer should attempt, by his/her clarification questions, not to leave anything unclear. A successful narrative interview is rich in details, full of descriptions.

The clarification questions are not asked when the doubt arises whether they fragment the story. When the narrator stops, when (s)he runs out of story, the interviewer makes

him/her return to the moments of the story remained unclear or incomplete through sentences such as: “you said that... I would like you to tell me more about...”, “let’s return to...”, “I would like you to give me further details about...” etc.

There are a few mistakes made especially by novice interviewers. The unusual interviewing situation is for the researcher not to have prepared questions. Therefore it happens quite often, assuming the subject does not recount, for the interviewer to panic and to ask questions at random. Here is an example from a young manager’s biographical interviewing:

Subject: *We were a large family; I had to work, also learn and go to school ... I was not obedient, played football all day and on coming home I was beaten up.*

Interviewer: *What were your parents like, what kind of friends did you have?*

Subject: *Parents... they were always scolding me for not coming home on time, they were beating me up ... Children... we had no worry: we played all sorts of games.*

Interviewer: *Which is the best and worst thing that happened to you during childhood?*

When the subject fails to recount, when (s)he answers briefly and dryly, the interviewer must show him/her through clarification questions that (s)he expects something else. In the example above, the interviewer should have asked for details about the family wherein the subject grew up, about the works (s)he had to perform during childhood, should have asked why “(s)he was beaten up”, what games (s)he played etc. The subject understands thereby that the interviewer is interested in details, that (s)he is only satisfied by more thorough answers.

The questions formulated within the narrative interview must be formulated so as to generate a story. Here are a few examples from a biographical interview: “What happened in your life then?”, “How would you describe the person you were by that time?”, “Can you describe the most important

lessons you learnt during this experience?” Questions that can be answered with yes or no are usually answered: no! Therefore they should be avoided. For instance, the question “do you inform yourselves from other sources, too?” should not be asked, but “you told me you watched TV and browsed the Internet. What other information sources do you use?” The questions should make subjects recount, not expect further solicitations that may be monosyllabically satisfied. Difficult questions cut off the respondents’ enthusiasm. For instance, the subjects should not be required to “enumerate the types of stores they frequent” but maybe: “I would like you to take me imaginarily shopping. Let’s see where we would go, how are the stores we would enter?”.

The narrative interview ends when the subject has nothing more to say and the clarification questions have been run out. It is possible for this to happen after repeated interviews. The life story, for instance, may not be covered in a single meeting (as a meeting cannot take longer than two-three hours).

Even if the interview is recorded (an unrecorded narrative interview is a lost interview!) the interviewer may take notes during the interview. I dare say it is even advisable for him/her to take notes, even if (s)he does not feel the need. From my experience as an interviewer, I noticed that taking notes made the subjects more responsible (“if the researcher takes notes, this means that (s)he is really interested, that I must take the interview seriously”), makes them confident they say important things, makes them trust in their capacity to successfully cope with the interviewing situation. Then, based on the notes, the interviewer formulates the clarification questions (unless put down, uncertainties are forgotten).

There are cases where the narrative interview fails because of the subjects. No matter how would the interviewer try to make

them recount, there are subjects who do not like to talk. Just as there are subjects eager to talk (sometimes the interviewer cannot even finish formulating the narrative question). A narrative interview fails most times because of the interviewer (if (s)he is bored, so will the subject be; if (s)he is interested, the subject will feel and will endeavour more to cope, if (s)he is enthusiastic, the subject will try to tell more; if (s)he does not allow the latter to get away with monosyllabic answers, the subject will know that more is expected from him/ her etc.).

#### **4. Examples of narrative-interview application**

I have applied the narrative-interview technique in variegated research situations. I further describe some of them.

I tried to identify the managers' identity features and I biographically interviewed 20 managers in the county of Brașov. The respondents were shown that the facts were also important (for instance: when and where they were born – information wherewith many subjects began), but that the stories about events or minor happenings having remained in their memory are more important (for instance: who taught them to ride the bicycle, how they experienced the accident involving their dog, what they learnt from their grandmother and so on.). In general, the subjects spoke freely, they themselves led the interview towards certain biographical aspects: "A good interview, a good life story is one wherein the interviewee takes control of the interviewing situation and speaks freely" [2, p. 39]. See results obtained from this research in [12] and [13].

Then the owner of a commercial company in Brașov resorted to a team of sociologists (wherein I took part) in order to solve a problematic situation (the company was confronted to varied problems caused by its employees – the productivity was low, there

were numerous mistakes in every department, leading to a lot of waste and many complaints from the customers, to significant losses in terms of money and clients). A first step was to identify the problems faced by the company from the managing employees' standpoint. Eight departmental managers were interviewed. The narrative interviewing started with the following generative question: "Mister manager RT believes the company does not operate as it should and he called a team of sociologists to discover what is happening.

My role is to find out what you think it is going on. I will have the same discussion with the other managers of the company. I am convinced you know what is about (even if you have never thought about it seriously; even if you have not opened up regarding all these issues so far). Please talk to me thoroughly about what you think it is not going well in the company wherein you work and in the department you run. We are not in a hurry. Please think about and tell me everything you have in mind (even if some things seem insignificant to you, even if you reckon some others to be taboo and so on). Everything coming to your mind is significant and interesting to me!" This study resulted in an inventory of the identity discrepancies (differences among the way they perceive themselves, the way they think to be perceived by others, the way they are perceived by the owner of the company and the way they are perceived by the other managers), the relational schema between departments and their heads, and lots of elements related to the interaction among the members of the company (the results are forthcoming).

In another research situation, I studied the return-migration phenomenon, in terms of identity changes perceived by the migrants having returned home (the study was achieved in the village of Drăguș, county of Brașov, on five families returned from Italy after several years spent working

there). The narrative question we addressed to the subjects was the following: “I am very interested in the villagers who went abroad for a while and now are back. I would like you to tell me as many things about this experience as you can. How was it like to go through this? There are many people among us who have not thought about leaving or who could not leave, who have not lived away from home. I would like you to make us understand how it was – with emotions, feelings, happenings – good and bad. Please tell me thoroughly about your departure, about the period spent away from the country and about your return to the village; about yourself during each of these life stages. We are not in a hurry. I am interested in everything was important to you, even if they seem petty and insignificant things”. The results of this study are forthcoming (co-author Codrina Şandru).

We likewise resorted to the narrative interview in an oral-history type interview made for Electrica Distribution Transilvania Sud, wherein we tried to discover the history of electrification in the County of Braşov and to reconstruct the atmosphere of that time within Electrica. The question addressed to our subjects (we made 53 interviews with former employees) was: “We know next to nothing about how Electrica was once and how the electrification was achieved. We would like you to tell us thoroughly about the period you worked within this company; how it was like to work there? Anything you can tell us about your work at Electrica has relevance and interest for us. We would like you to recount in detail, in no hurry. You can tell us everything coming to your mind; everything you remember is significant, even if they seem petty, insignificant things. We would like to understand what meant to be an employee of Electrica at that time, what meant to make electrification. Please take us into the atmosphere of the days

when you were working there!” The research supposed studying also the archives of Electrica (for results, see [16]).

In an ongoing research, we have applied the narrative interview in the attempt to construct a theory of creativity based on the definitions given by ordinary people. The interviewing students were instructed to use the following generative question: “We are now learning at school about creativity. Our professors are rather dissatisfied with the definitions given so far to creativity and they are convinced that ordinary people like you could talk to us a lot better about it. We do not expect dictionary definitions (the definitions like – “creativity is when you...” work fine). We would simply like to know what creativity means for you. There are no good answers and wrong answers. Everything you can think of, no matter how vague, is helpful to us. Please help us understand what you hold creativity to be. We are not in a hurry!”

### **5. What kind of data does the narrative interview produce?**

The narrative interview generates qualitative data (therefore rich in detail, complex, not affected by the researcher’s intervention, suggestive, genuine, vivid). Narrative interviews produce numerous data (often covering dozens of pages), sometimes requiring repeated meetings with the respondents. The narrative-interviewing situations “imitate” regular situations of everyday life, wherein people often find themselves telling various things to friends, neighbours, acquaintance etc. Hence it is closer (than other interviewing techniques) to fulfilling the desideratum of qualitative research referring to “natural”.

The description of the experiences in the narrative interview is highly suggestive, the obtained data are thorough. Here is a fragment of narrative interview wherein a social worker recounts his first weeks of

labour: *“Pity made me good for nothing after the four hours spent with the children as, out of compassion, I appeared to let my last bit of physical and soul energy consumed. [...] In my early experience, on a patient’s coming with his/her problems, all I could do was to cry beside him/her for his/her problems. [...] After a while of such experiences, I felt a terrible inner suffocation. I was ever more exhausted and depressed and I did not even manage to help people enough. I was awfully afraid thinking I might even go insane over a few years, as the patients’ situation and problems accompanied me in mind and soul throughout the day.”*

Successful narrative interviews make the listener feel what the story-teller feels, make him/her “be” where the recounted event occurs. Here are such data collected from a chat-addicted teenager (it is about the period when the Internet was quite inaccessible, except after 8 o’clock when the connection-costs were lower; most dial-up-connected Internet users desperately waited for this time to browse): *“There were days, in the ninth, tenth grade, when I stayed up late at night on the net. I had the class channel and all fights, confessions, gossip took place there, in those Mirc windows. The imposed program began at 8 o’clock in the evening and 2, 3 minutes before that time, I switched on the computer clock and started the countdown. At 20:00 I clicked “connect” almost trembling with joy. Connection drop was the worst thing that could happen to me. I felt detached from the world, I was sure that while I was trying to reconnect I was losing all details, all fun”.*

## 6. Conclusions

The technique of the narrative interview is used in variegated research situations. In most qualitative researches where data are collected through the interview, this

technique is applied in the early phases of the research (after the data analysis, the interviews become semi-structured). It is specific to the narrative-type research. In the article herein, I offered examples of biographical researches, sociological services, group biographies, oral histories wherein the narrative interview, as main data-collection technique, yielded valuable information.

The narrative technique is criticized because of the subjectivity characterizing the obtained data (the subjects are charged with intervening in the selection of the supplied information, with combining and interpreting them, see [4]). Bourdieu [apud 7] shows that people only retrospectively tend to compose a consonant, coherent narrative biography (Bourdieu calls this phenomenon biographical illusion). Most of them, the author further claims, much as some researchers, tend to see that life has unfolded by a certain logic, with cohesive “stories”, the “whole” of the narrativity actually being often post-factum. This criticism applies not only to biographical stories, but also to whatever story of past experiences.

There are authors who deem the obtained data not only to be subjective, but also to be likely of being invented. This “limit” was defined as distinction between factual truth and narrative truth. In fact, “for some qualitative researchers, the content of the subjects’ utterances during the interview does not have to be related to an ontic referential, namely raising the question whether they are true or false in relation to some data of reality, but they must be regarded in themselves, as expressions of the subjects’ symbolical-cultural representations and practices” [7, p. 185].

Many reproaches brought to the narrative technique of the interview are reproaches brought to the qualitative research in general. They are also tackled in [14], this not being the place to resume them. The narrative interview is the most

“qualitative” interviewing technique, beside the group interview. Whilst displaying limitations (what data-collection technique is utterly faultless?), it is essential in certain knowledge-production contexts.

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