

Social Contexts and Responses to Risk Network (SCARR)

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Introduction to Biographical Research

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Biographical research is a wide field of different approaches and research strategies with blurred borders and overlapping areas. Therefore it seems to be useful to orient oneself in this jungle of empirical strategies and conceptual ideas. Since it is impossible to give an exhaustive overview I sort out specific approaches of (biographical) research which have a comparable clear theoretical-conceptual background and a developed empirical instrument. It is not necessary that one follows a specific approach absolutely, rather these approaches are examples to illustrate different strategies which could be modified for your own purposes or give you new perspectives how to modify your own approach.

My short introduction is narrowed to approaches using interviews to get access to the relevant issues of research. There are also ethnographic field studies and analysis of written text, for instance, autobiographical writing.

I have used three core questions to sort through the different approaches of biographical research:

1. What is the main focus of research?
2. What is the aim of research?
3. What are the methods?

By answering these questions several aspects can be distinguished:

1. Three general streams of research:
 - Narrative research as a generic approach.
 - Biographical research on identity emphasizes a holistic-form analysis.
 - Biographical research on action modes emphasizes content analysis and it is mostly concerned with specific issues.
2. For some researchers the central aim of research is to produce rich descriptions (of persons) whereas others aim to conceptualise structural types (action logics or how persons and structures are interlinked). Each method of the following approaches could be used to do both even though some researchers completely refuse the possibility of generalizations.
3. On the level of research methods I distinguish between
 - approaches using a broad range of material as e.g. letters, publications, autobiographical writing,
 - research which uses the Narrative Interview (Schütze 1976, 1983, compare Rosenthal 2004), and

- semi-structured interview-strategies (e.g. problem centred interview, Witzel 2000).

Narrative, identity and action

The term 'narrative research' is commonly used for a huge area of diverse research approaches and strategies. It could be used as a generic term of all approaches interested in narrations (Lieblich et al. 1998, 2). Under this general umbrella biographical research is situated. Sometimes a group of researchers supports a quite specific approach and empirical instrument against the overwhelming diversity in the area, so it is possible to isolate some comparable homogenous research strategies. This is the case in the kind of biographical research I will indicate in this paper.

First, I would like to demarcate (linguistic, psychological) narrative research from other biographical research because of the limitation to the produced narrations and the verbal expressed self-identity. In a so characterized 'ideal type' of narrative perspective there is no intention to explain action or it is assumed that with the explanation of sense-making (identity, personality) in general the action can be derived directly. The research focuses on the structure of the text, the semantics used and the sense/symbols transported by narratives, this includes questions of identity-formation and the link between discourses and identities. Topics of such research are, for instance, the strategic self-presentation (counter narratives) or the symbolic construction of reality by narratives (Andrews et al. 2004).

In the realm of narrative research there is also a lot of work on biography and autobiographical self-representation. But the focus of this work is mainly on the linguistic and symbolic level of identity-formation.

The two other approaches I would like to mention below are on the one hand more interested on the biography as a whole in the sense of lifelong biographical work and on the other hand on biographical action in the sense of shaping the own life course. Whereas the first approach is primarily concerned with holistic analysis of form and what is behind the told story the latter focuses on context analysis and tends to examine categorical questions.

Narrative research

Since narrative research is a generic term diverse qualitative approaches overlap with the notion of narrative research. Especially the empirical approaches of discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and others might be partly quite similar to the self-image of narrative research. Here I'm referring to a research perspective which explicitly assigns itself as a narrative approach.

- The main issue of narrative research, which is regularly discussed, concerns the conversational constitution of a narration in the process of the interview by interviewer and interviewee (e.g. Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2000, 202).
- Since a told story and identity is interpreted as something strongly linked together the processes of personality construction (and development) in the interview is also a main topic (e.g. Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2000, 220).
- Additionally, research focuses on the discourses or 'voices' which could be identified in a story and where an interviewee positions oneself (e.g. Wortham 2000, compare, for instance, the journal 'Narrative Inquiry').
- Narrations are often discussed in the context of power and empowerment. This concerns the situation in an interview as well as the general discourses the interviewees refer to (e.g. Gluck/Patai 1991).

It is useful to differ the huge amount of narrative research with the help of two dimensions. First, it can be distinguished whether the approaches follow a holistic or a rather categorical view. Secondly, the approaches differ in the concern on questions of content or form. Combining these two dimensions, four areas of research result:

- holistic-content (In this view the focus is the interview as a whole. Specific narrations in an interview have to be interpreted with regard to the whole interview),
- holistic-form (In this perspective the structure of complete interviews or life stories has to be analysed. The way of self-presentation in single sections of the interview is interpreted in the context of the whole interview),
- categorical-content (The text is structured by categories and the content of categories are analysed and compared) and

- categorical-form (The analysis focuses on discrete stylistic or linguistic characteristics of defined units of the narrative.).

Often narrative research refers to more than one area but regularly an approach prefers a certain perspective. A helpful and practical overview about these perspectives give Lieblich and colleagues (1998, 12ff.).

To become more familiar with the narrative approach it might also be helpful to look at the book of Hollway and Jefferson (2000) 'Doing qualitative research differently'. They emphasize the importance of open questions and free narrations for discovering the "gestalt" of personal patterns of subjectivity. They also show the importance of reflecting about the position of the interviewer and its personal experiences influencing the relation to the interviewee and the interview as a whole. Even though I am not a supporter of psychoanalysis I think the book gives a lot of good hints for qualitative research interviewing and common mistakes which could and should be avoided. Since the material that is used to illustrate the methodological issues belongs to a study on fear of crime it is close to the problematic of our quantitative questionnaire and some of the projects' research questions.

A number of publications in the series *The Narrative Study of Lives* edited by Josselson and Lieblich might be also of interest.

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Biographical research

The two explicitly biographical approaches I would like to mention can be distinguished by their fundamental assumption about the method of interviewing and the main object of research.

The first approach emphasises the reconstruction of the single case and the development of the 'personality' in the life course. The present self-

representation has to be analysed by the central difference of experienced life history and the narrated life story. This approach is particularly interested in the things not mentioned in an interview but existing under the surface of the self-presentation.

The second approach emphasises problem specific action modes and is more concerned with the systematic comparison of different action modes than general personality structures. Additionally, it is doubted whether controlled access to past experiences by means of today's biographical narrations is possible. For this reason the current self-presentations or action-modes are the object of research rather than the reconstruction of life-long accumulation of experiences. This approach is not so much concerned with the untold things and the things people like to hide, but with the semantics used to describe their (biographical) actions.

Biographical identity – biographical structuring

The biographical research, which focuses on **biographical identity** or **biographical structuring** (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000, 114ff.), assumes that the link between structure and individuals could only be understood sufficiently by analysing the development of the individual personality in the life course. Thus the excessive analysis of the single case is emphasized and the discovery of the issues not mentioned in the interview is important for a sufficient case analysis.

This approach is strongly linked to phenomenology and A. Schütz's work. The core idea is that during the life course individuals accumulate diverse biographical experiences into a coherent description of their life course. These experiences are present in our knowledge we use in everyday life, biographical decision-making as well as in the story we present in an interview-situation. Our self-representations or biographical stories are linked to these experiences they are not totally free from our past. The link into the past gives us the possibility to do research on the past life history and the development of the today's self out of the present perspective.

Against this background this research tries to assess the difference between experienced life history (our past experiences) and narrated life story (how we interpret our life from the current point of view) in order to show how their current biography or self-description is determined by the past experiences.

Method

Against the theoretical background mentioned, the empirical research strategy aims at the **case structure** as the central aim of analysis. It is assumed, that the link between social context and individual could be best analysed by single cases and their individual experiences. This approach is strongly bound to the excessive analysis of the holistic form and content of single cases. Thus they try to do justice to the person and one's personal experience. While some researchers are still seeing the only way of research in excessive analysis of ungeneralizable single cases, others are much more open for generalizations (Rosenthal 2004) but still stick to the analysis of the single case as point of origin.

The central form of interviewing in this approach is the **Narrative Interview** introduced by Schütze (1976, 1983) in the German discourse. For a useful and short description how this method has to be carried out compare Rosenthal (2004, 50ff.).

The core structure of the interview is a division in a first step of free narration and a second step of further questioning. In the first step the interviewee is "asked, by means of an initial opening question, to give a full extempore narration of events and experiences from their own lives. The ensuing story, or 'main narrative,' is not interrupted by further questions but is encouraged by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention". The idea of this procedure is to prevent uncontrollable affects on the interviewee's process of remembering and self-presentation. Thus, the interviewee has space to emphasise what is important and to structure the narration on his/her own terms.

In the second part of the interview 'the period of questioning' – the interviewer initiated, with narrative questions, more elaborate narrations on topics and biographical events already mentioned. In addition the interviewer asks about issues that had not been addressed. (Rosenthal 1993, 60)

The biographical case reconstruction of an interview follows the steps:

- Analysis of the (objective) biographical data
- Text and thematic field analysis (structure of self-presentation; reconstruction of the life story; narrated life).
- Reconstruction of the life history (lived life as experienced).
- Microanalysis of individual text segments.
- Contrastive comparison of life history (experienced life) and life story (narrated life).

- Development of types and contrastive comparison of several cases. (Rosenthal 2004, 54ff.)

For a short but helpful description of this approach compare Rosenthal (2004).

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Action research – content analysis

The kind of research I call **biographical action research** likewise evaluates the single cases as the biographical identity approach. But biographical action research is more concerned with action modes in specific societal areas or how individuals respond to certain problems than with the reconstruction of the whole identity. Additionally, the approach is quite critical about the possibility to get access to the past experiences by today's interviews. The research focuses on actions in situations which could be understood in **situational logics**. Thus the object is rather on general observable or mentioned action logics than on the development of the underlying personality structure during the life course. This approach is less concerned with the hidden personal problems but sees the interviewee as an emancipated person which expresses its own experiences.

Such a procedure is normally assigned to content analysis. But this is problematic because content analysis is quite a general term that comprises a much wider area of diverse techniques of analysis (also quantitative/standardised methods).

Biographical action research starts with observable meaningful actions. Referring to 'grounded theory' (Strauss/Corbin 1990) the idea is the

systematic comparison of meaningful actions. Not the personality but how different actions and action logics come together or are linked to specific contexts is the significant question of this kind of research.

That does not mean that a persons options to behave in a social context is determined by the social context, nor that is determined by past experiences, rather that there is a limited number of meaningful actions observable in specific social contexts and innovations are always possible. The aim of research is not to derive a person's action from their personal structure but identifying different ways of how people behave in different contexts and against the background of different interpretations of their context.

Method

The technique of how to interview – for example in the **Problem Centred Interview** (Witzel 2000) – is normally more structured than in the Narrative Interview. The idea of an interview situation with a minimum of uncontrolled influence by the interviewer as in the Narrative Interview is replaced by the idea of the belief in the significance of a trustful interview situation where the interviewee tries to explain the own perspective and the interviewer tries to understand what the interviewee wants to express. One important assumption is, that the normal situation in which persons present themselves are situations of communication and not a monolog.

But there are still the techniques used in qualitative interviews as open questioning which should provoke narratives or reflecting what we have already understood to strengthen the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

There is no clear distinction between a first narrative step of the interview and a second step with questions, rather it is a kind of talk systematised by further questions covering different issues in the field of research-interest. An in advance formulated guide of questions and significant issues is important for the systematic evaluation of the interviews (compare for a short introduction: Witzel 2000).

Since the aim of action research is the comparison of a high number of different action modes used by different persons regarding specific problem-situations many researchers use computer-assisted strategies of data analysis (compare Kelle 2004).

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