Peter Alheit

The Narrative Interview

An Introduction

This paper is the attempt to make the relevant scientific information on the “narrative interview” (cf. Kallmeyer & Schütze 1977; Schütze 1978; Hermanns 1981) accessible to beginners and to put even laymen in the position of handling correctly the narrative interview as an instrument of qualitative social research. This demands a certain preparedness for simplification which is nevertheless appropriate to the subject at hand. The attempt seems to me justified because I have made the experience that the encounter with the scientific texts which are available often poses for beginners superfluous barriers of understanding.

What do we mean by “narrative”? 

The word “narrare” comes from Latin and means telling, relating, recounting. What is so special about it? “Telling” seems to have a familiar ring: fairytales are told. The “red grandfather” tells a story. When we compare the sound of the word with “saying” or “reporting” we notice that “telling” is more emotional. Telling is a way of reliving the past. This is what makes it so interesting. But the form of telling is also something rather special. Telling follows different rules from those of reporting or arguing.

In the cause of everyday conversation we do not normally think about the fact that we are following certain rules. Of course it occurs to us on occasion that some people talk longer and more frequently than others. We experience also that when some people are talking less attention is paid to them than to others. Women tend to find that what they have to say gets “submerged”. What is the reason for this? It is certainly not a question of the contributions themselves but of the fact that they were made by women. Sometimes too we are irritated by the way someone speaks – affectedly, arrogantly or simply showing off. Then the content of his/her contribution is quite beside the point. We just can’t stand listening any longer.

All these “rules” which we know do not concern us here. It is a question of rules which we use but which we are not aware of. Whoever for example comes up with the idea that there could be rules concerning the change of speakers? And yet we all know how difficult it is to “get a word in” in heated discussion. We make a start several times – without success. We lean forward demonstratively – still without success; we take a deep and meaningful breath and look at the previous speaker. And it is only when s/he has “passed on the word” that it is our turn. It is the “rule” in non-hierarchically structured communication situations that it is the previous speaker who grants “permission to speak” (cf. Sacks 1971; Sacks, Jefferson & Schegloff 1974). Not exactly a notion which would occur to one spontaneously!

---

1 This paper, first published in 1982 as ‘Arbeitspapier No. 8’ of the research project “Arbeiterbiographien” at Bremen University has now – apart from German and English - been published in Danish (1989), Italian (1990), Spanish (1991) Greek (1999), Polish (2002) and Korean (2005).
We find similarly surprising “rules” in the realm of everyday telling. If we get the chance of telling something to other people, if a circle of listeners or even a single listener gives us his/her undivided attention, then we must also have something to tell. We join in a kind of contract and have to do our bit to make sure that this contract is held: the “regulations for recounting a story” come into force. We should point out here that everyday telling (spontaneous telling) is by no means the same thing as the literary form of telling – the epic form. There are no “hard” aesthetic criteria. And yet we do have a notion as to whether or not someone is good at telling. So there must be some hidden criteria.

The most basic precondition for a story is the fact that it must be worth telling. This point is by no means as trivial as might at first appear. This can be made clear by way of a negative example: “Just imagine someone speaking to another person and telling him without any further explanation something on the following lines: ‘This morning at half past six the alarmclock went off, I got out of bed and went for a piss; then I brushed my teeth, had a shower, got shaved, combed and dressed. At breakfast – in the meantime my wife had made the coffee – I read the newspaper, well that is the headlines, it’s a load of rubbish mostly, and then off I went to the tram which was naturally late as usual. I just about managed to get to the office on time where my colleagues from room 308 were having the usual little morning chat about the weather and last night’s TV show and what’s happening today, and then we got started (various details on the daily job), until midday. I went to the canteen with Mrs. Meier – the grub is always the same but it’s not too bad – and then we did another quick stint until half past four: tidying up the desk, washing hands etc.’ etc.” (Michel 1975:1)

Michel comments his invented everyday story by the bright idea of adding the scene which might follow: “‘What do you mean?’ would come at last as the question of the person spoken to in this way, granted that he had listened so long anyway. He would be puzzled, bewildered, irritated. ‘What do you mean? That’s what I do every day, five days a week, and I’ve been doing that for years!’ – ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t see what that’s got to do with me. Why are you telling me that?’ If the first person now produced a punchline of some kind such as ‘Do you know that today was the five thousandth time?’ then there would be a certain justification for his report and the listener would have the chance of reacting in a fitting way: ‘You don’t say, ha ha, the five thousandth time ... big deal!’ But without this punchline the report would appear so pointless, irrelevant and embarrassing that the person spoken to would have his occasion to report this absurd incident to a third person: ‘Just fancy – a man came up to me and told me ... completely crazy!’ But it is not the everyday experience that the other one was telling him about which would appear to him as crazy but precisely his talking about this everyday experience.” (1975:1f)

To put it quite precisely: the fictitious actor has not recounted anything – at best he has only reported. Storytelling requires something which will make the person spoken to want to pass on the unexpected incident in his/her turn. What is needed is a punchline, a complication. Everyday recounting also requires punchlines. It also follows the pattern “orientation, complication, solution” which is the basis for every fairytale and for every joke (cf Labov & Waletzky 1973). Without this tension we cannot tell a story. Once I have started off on such an enterprise my hand is forced and I am placed on the spot. I have to follow rules which I can only neglect at my peril.
A story which I have begun has got to have an ending (‘the law of closing’). We cannot just begin by telling a story and then suddenly break off or without any comment just change over to the rules of presenting an argument. That would be extremely embarrassing. When small children – imitating the adults – go on and on without coming to the point they very soon notice from the impatience or irritation of the adults that they have broken an unspoken “rule”. In order to make the story intelligible we must provide enough detail (“the law of detail”). The best stories are those in which the listener feels himself “transposed”. s/he sees the incident recounted from the perspective of the storyteller. It is as though the events recounted were taking place once again, as though what happened to the storyteller were happening to him/her once again. In order to get transposed into the “world” of the storyteller the listener does need more than the bare bones of what happened in the past. s/he must know the scene and the time spans which were involved. s/he must be able to imagine the other actors and opponents. s/he must be able to draw up for himself a “picture” of the situation the storyteller is talking about. So details are acquired and the storyteller cannot avoid providing them if his/her story is to “succeed”. When it comes to detail however we must always concentrate on the essentials (“the law of relevance and condensation”). If we get lost in detail we ruin the effect of the story. People who “can’t tell jokes” are often not only those who don’t know any jokes or who only remember parts of the punchline (these indeed are sometimes the occasion for even more merriment). The ones who really test our nerves are those who “go on and on” and who ride even the best jokes to death. As a rule they reap only polite laughter because they notoriously ignore the law of condensation (on the meaning of “being placed on the spot” cf. Kallmeyer & Schütze 1977:162, 188ff).

It is certainly not the case that such rules operate in all interaction situations. We certainly know intuitively that not everything which we say is a story. The university ought for example to be a place where the “pattern of storytelling” applies only marginally. It is a place for argument, theory and reports. It is a different matter at the bar or in the train. We all know the proverbial situation of meeting a complete stranger who tells us his/her whole life-story. But we ourselves have a bent towards storytelling in comparable situations (cf. Kohli 1981; Alheit 1982).

When then does storytelling take place? A fairly trivial explanation is to be found in the fact that storytelling in everyday life evidently needs a certain frame of interaction. We cannot tell stories in just any situation. “Formal” situations like professional actions, official confrontations, trials etc. are not particularly well suited as “story frameworks”. Stories require an atmosphere which is to a certain degree friendly, confidential and indeed intimate. This is mainly because storytelling has two particular characteristics:

- Storytelling takes time. In contrast to brief reports a story requires a degree of leisure on the part of the listener. In defined storytelling situations such as the theatre there is no problem. In normal everyday situations – at all events in our culture – time is a commodity which is not in unlimited supply.

- It is precisely biographical accounts which place the teller in the forefront. This presents no problem when Robert Redford is recounting his memoires. In the case of ordinary people this presupposes a framework which is only hinted at with the label “personal talk with friends” (cf. Quasthoff 1979:115). Even under the anony-
mous conditions of a train journey leisure and a certain degree of confidence are prerequisites for the “triggering off” of a biographical account.

Social scientists do use such “rules”. They know that people say a great deal about themselves when they are telling something. For this reason they attempt to “entice” stories in a methodically controlled way (cf. Schütze 1978). This may well sound “obscene”. It gives rise to the impression that social scientists try to draw their testpersons into a “trap” with the intention of “intangling” people in their stories. But it is not quite like that. Nobody can be compelled to tell a story and a confidential atmosphere cannot be simply feigned. When someone with a story to tell not only shows his/her general readiness to so but really begins with his/her account in the interview situation, when s/hein the language of the sociologists “ratifies” the contract of telling a story then s/henormally has a pretty good feeling that there is an atmosphere of trust between the two and not that one is trying to “sound out” the other. In the absence of this feeling the interviewee will be sure to “beat about the bush” because s/heintuitively knows that the recounting of his/her story will result in his/her being placed inextricably on the spot. All s/hewill do then is to give a report or a theoretical presentation on his/her life. These strategies are much less “dangerous” and above all enable the actor to retain control of things.

**How does one conduct a narrative interview?**

**What has to be borne in mind?**

What has been said up to now is plausible and easy to check – but it remains pure theory. The conduct of a narrative interview is practice. Here one can make big mistakes – but one can also learn correct interview behaviour. The best thing is to note a few rules which should not be understood as technical directions but rather as a guide to the general orientation.

**Rule 1: Prepare an interview carefully.**

Interviews in which people tell their life story need not be viewed as television interviews. You as the listener must prepare yourself just as much as the one telling the story. One recommendation is to make a date before the actual interview at which questions are cleared up and intentions laid bare (see rule 3). Brow-beating or talking someone into something does not help at all and simply has a negative affect on the readiness to tell a story.

**Rule 2: Interview only people who really interest you on account of their own person or their particular problem.**

This does not mean that you have to develop a particular liking for them. It may be that one interviews people who one just cannot stand. Nevertheless it is important to talk precisely to such people. Your interest will provide the opportunity of conducting a successful interview. So feigned interest is dangerous. One has to put on an act to suppress a lack of interest. And even if the interviewee himself does not notice it it can be a real torture for the interviewer.
Rule 3: State openly the purpose of your interview.

With regard to their lives it is the interviewees who are the experts – not you. So they have a right to know what is going to happen to the material which they bring into the research process. Assure them that no names will be given so that in the case of publication identification will not be possible. But never promise too much! Social scientists tend at the beginning to “buy” the good will of their clients through exaggerated communication offers. Later on they realise that they are not in a position to keep their promises. Remember you are an interested social scientist, not an intimate friend!

Rule 4: Say something about yourself as well.

A biographical interview is not an “egalitarian” communication situation. The roles of speaker and listener are clear-cut. You are the listener. This rigid definition which has a certain similarity to social situations such as interrogations or confession to a priest can be broken if prior to the interview you talk about yourself, say who you are, what you do and why you are so ardently interested precisely in biographical interviews.

Rule 5: You need time and a steadfast interest.

Remember at the outset that there is nothing particular which you want to find out. Do not let yourself be dominated by a “secret guiding thread”. This could interrupt the interviewee from saying something s/he was just about to mention. In the second and third phase of the interview (see below) you will have sufficient opportunity for asking further questions. So take your time. The best thing is to arrange an open-end date with the interviewee. Do not begin straight away with the interview. Talk about obvious and everyday things. Switch the recorder on during the preliminary conversation. In this way you will avoid a pretentious cut at the beginning of the interview which in all experience has then to be “digested”.

Rule 6: Make sure that the rules of telling the story are really “ratified” at the beginning of the interview.

You must have the impression that the interviewee knows what it is all about. s/he is to tell his/her lifestory and not develop a theory of how miserable s/he may be feeling. As a rule the interviewee gives this “ratification” explicitly. s/he says for example: “All right then, let’s get started ...” or “Well, I’ll start with my story ...”. If s/he is uncertain (“Where shall I begin then ...?”) it is necessary for you to give an instruction (such as: “Just begin with your childhood. You’ll be surprised how much you think of ...”).

Rule 7: When the interviewee has begun, remain in the background as far as possible.

You will see that this is more difficult than you think. Perhaps the interviewee will attempt to draw you into a conversation. Make it clear to him/her what it is that you want. Perhaps you’ll get worried by a long pause. Try to decide whether the interviewee needs this in order to think things over, whether s/he is lost in thought concerning a particularly dramatic episode which s/he has just recounted or whether quite simply there is “no more air left”. Then you can intervene. Don’t make yourself the interviewee’s “mate”, and never make comments on his/her views. Maintain an
equilibrium of interest. Make that clear too in your gestures by reacting to him/her with your mimicry. Say “hmm” and “yes?” but barely more than that. Then you are the ideal listener and the mechanism of telling the story gets under way.

**Rule 8: It is important in the initial phases of the interview that you avoid questions such as “why?” and “what for?”**

You want to draw out a story. So ask “How did that happen?” “What happened then?” If you ask why then you put the interviewee in a situation of having to justify himself. But this triggers off the mechanism of argumentation and as a rule tends to smother the readiness to tell the story. Of course it can be interesting to make a point of provoking arguments, explanations and “theories”. But it should be emphasised that this belongs to the end of an interview when the interviewee has “no more to say”.

**Rule 9: Postpone concrete questions to a “follow-up phase”**.

At the beginning the interviewee speaks “spontaneously”. S/he tends to build a “ring of tension” around his/her life. Listen to him/her with interest – even if s/he consciously or unconsciously omits certain phases of his/her life. Remember such gaps. When s/he has finished his “initial story” which may indeed be quite short, when s/he has given a clear signal (“Well, that’s it really” or something of the sort) then you can begin the follow up phase. But not before then! Even here it is important to avoid questions such as “I noticed that you have said nothing about your mother; why is that?” Put a question such as “You have just said something about your childhood in the village. Can you remember a few details?” etc. Even the follow-up phase has the intention of drawing out narrative memories and not drawing up “balances”.

**Rule 10: Do not be afraid of making mistakes.**

You will be startled by so many rules. Take them seriously but do not be pedantic. You will make many mistakes in interviewing. Learn your lessons and write down further rules. If you are interested and attentive you will not be able to make so many mistakes so that the interviewee is not able to tell his/her story. Remember that telling a story can be fun and that it is a pleasant experience to be in the forefront and to have a listener who evidently has unlimited interest and above all time.

Summing up: the narrative interview is based on a concrete theory of storytelling which everyone can check for himself. A central component of this theory is the observation that the spontaneous recounting of a story is much less controllable than for example in the case of making a report or presenting an argument. The interviewee runs the risk of “putting his/her foot in it” or “getting put on the spot” and here he is of course on dangerous ground.

These pressures and preconscious “rules” lead now to conscious rules, to the methodical control of interviewer behaviour. Just as the psychoanalyst has to get to know and master the phenomenon of transfer and counter-transfer so the narrative interviewer must get to know the various pressures which operate in the process of narration and work with them. To be found in his/her pragmatic repertoire are for example
- empathy and interest,
- a strategic reserve and
- a differentiation of the interview situation (preparation phase, main story, follow up-phase (evoking “missing stories”), evaluation phase (asking prepared key questions).\footnote{Just to have an overview how the narrative interview “works”, see the following scheme:}

References:


