

Some thoughts to the method of biographic interview

The biographic interview is a specific form of interviewing. To tell about one's own life is a reflective learning technique. When you tell about your life you establish a connection between your own life and your societal environment, the place where you live, the place where you have grown up.

In a biographic narration you are looking for the common thread through your life – you try to connect breakings and inconsistencies as they are in each human life.

By telling the history of our lives, we take stock of our life. We merge impressions and experiences into a story – which can differ depending on the setting within we tell our story, who is listening.

For that reason biographic narratives always change. You will never tell the same story twice.

Sometimes you put the emphasis on the one sometimes on the other aspect of your life.

In fact, telling your life story means learning of your own life. You always re-sort your experiences.

The other learning effect is on the side of the listener - by listening somebody's life story. The attentive listener always learns about the other's and the own life.

By listening we hear about "realities" from the narrator's perspective. These realities can be quite in contrary to our own experiences – or to historical scientific evidences.

This is not the point. The point isn't an "objective trueness" – but the point is how the narrator has experienced situations in their life – what kind of conclusions he or she draws from it.

Tips for a biographic interview

Phase of preparation when getting in contact: What – How – Why

- Clarifying the content: Why do you invite the partner to an interview? Framing the interview – telling about the project and its targets. Who else is involved into the project?
- Clarifying if the interviewee agrees with the recording / filming of the interview.
- What will happen with the text/recording after the interview?
- Clarifying "selective openness" – which topics should or shouldn't be addressed (e.g. traumatic experiences).
- Clarifying the time frame: 45-60 minutes, not longer than 90 minutes, because both, interviewer and interviewee, get tired as experiences teach.
- Place and atmosphere: find a quiet place where the interview can be conducted (a private place e.g. without disturbances)

The interview

- Start by summarizing the conditions agreed on (see preparation).
- How to open the interview?

Sometimes interviewees are sceptical if their life story is really of interest or they don't know how to start and want to be asked by the interviewer. That's why a good opening question is of importance, an open question which stimulates the narrative flow!

In biographic, narrative interviews one possibility would be to start with the childhood, where people grew up, e.g.: „You are born in 1934, now you are 80 years old, and you have a lot of experience. When you remember your childhood, ...”

In our case, the interview with people who have come to our countries as refugees, it is also possible to start with the moment, when they entered the country. It depends on the agreement you made in the preparation phase.

You could start with: “From our first contact I know that you have been here in this country since When you remember the first period here in ... what were your experiences, how did you manage the first period?”

During the interview:

1. From experience people often start with a long wave of narrative. Don't stop this flow until the interviewee makes a break.
2. „Intrinsic questions“: questions which refer directly to the afore mentioned: „Before you mentioned ... would you maybe like to tell more about this?”
3. „Extrinsic questions“: Questions which refer to details that haven't been mentioned yet. (e.g occupation, family ...)

General atmosphere:

- Keep calm, pay attention, show interest, be empathetic
- Maintain eye contact, consent, confirm you understand...mhm
- What to avoid: Do not enter yourself into the narration, minimize interruptions, give room to the interviewee
- Allow breaks and silences

After the interview

Send the interviewee the transcription of those parts of the interview you want to use for publication.