

Method in Practice: Autobiographical Narrative Interviews in Search of European Phenomena

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Introduction

Conducting autobiographical narrative interviews is a chance to approach people in their world of everyday life. Building our understanding of people's biographies we take into account the categories, elaborations and personal theories they construct around their own lives. Hence, autobiography is not only a methodological model for hermeneutic understanding of individual lives, but also a privileged way of approaching social reality. It gives access to the complexity of social life 'from within', uncovering the meaning that actors attribute to their actions. In an attempt to understand people's ways of acting, a biographical researcher visits the life world of an interviewee through a controlled listening to their story, which relates the course of events and their importance for a narrator. Events and actions are interpreted with regard to a certain structure of meaning (Prawda, 1987), and the narration is treated simultaneously as a reliable account of individual history and a symbolic construction.

Understanding, *Verstehen*, described as identifying the meaning behind observable events and importantly, identifying the meaning of action from the actor's point of view, dates as far back as Dilthey and Weber and derives from the hermeneutic critique of positivism. Biography, as a comprehensive picture of a life viewed from the perspective of the active agent and subject may be the basis on which this life can be best understood by others. In Dilthey's words, 'the self-biography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life is confronting us' (Dilthey, 1959 [1927]; Kohli, 1981a). Additionally, autobiographical narration embraces a continuum of past, present and future, which makes it possible to analyse the past, sometimes very

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difficult and painful, experiences and their influence on present patterns of action, and also the importance of current actions for the anticipated future.

On the basis of these assumptions, the purpose of this chapter is to present an account of our research process during the Euroidentities project. To enable an adequate comprehension of our study, our main aim is to illustrate the methodological procedures chosen both in collecting and analysing our material, with their difficulties and potential. Part of the chapter is dedicated to exploring the method of autobiographical narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze, whose methodological techniques formed the background to the Euroidentities project. Besides Schütze's methodology, the chapter considers also other qualitative approaches in the ambit of biographical research, used during the fieldwork constantly to enrich each other: BNIM (biographical narrative interpretative method), Narrative Ethnography, and the Social Constructivist Perspective. These analytical approaches are based on or in concordance with the general qualitative research technique of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and its later developments, such as Constructive Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, we reflect on the theoretical but also very practical aspects of applying the methods.

Methodological core Autobiographical narrative interview

The interview tradition of taking life histories has emerged in several quarters of the social sciences: in anthropology (Van Maanen, 1988), psychology (Mishler, 1986), sociolinguistics (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann, 2000, 2004), and sociology (Bertaux, 1980; Kohli, 1981a; Rosenthal, 1995; and Miller, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). We oriented ourselves to the methodological version of the narrative interview as proposed by Schütze and his collaborators, which gives informants the time and space to unwind the story of their life. Before the interview starts, the interviewer explains the general theme of the research but points out that, in telling their life story, interviewees may mention anything that has made them into the person they are today. Crucially, interviewees are told that they will not be interrupted, as the interviewer provides only limited, mostly non-verbal, responses, and they may take as long as they wish to tell their story. Once the narration finishes with a 'coda', such as 'Well, this is my life so far' (often with a coda-commentary which is way of summing up one's life), the interview moves to a second stage, when some additional questions concerning the interviewee's biography are asked in reaction to themes the narrator has brought up. During the third and last phase, the researcher can ask about motives ('why' questions) and more explicit questions relating to the focus of the research project. Subsequently, the interview material is transcribed in detail, and various textual features are distinguished, including different

communicative schemes of presentation as well as social and biographical process structures. These are regarded as important ordering principles that can throw light on the dynamics of personal experience, self-perception and transformation (Schütze, 2008a).

During the autobiographical narrative interview we see the phenomenon of extempore storytelling; the life story is told without previous preparation or practice. It is off-the-cuff. Certainly, we may encounter passages that have been told or even well rehearsed before. It could be a funny story from childhood told many times during family gatherings, or episodes from professional life illustrating one's career, told before in journalistic interviews and other occasions. However, it is virtually impossible to keep to a prepared and well-rehearsed script of the whole life story.

The fact that certain things are mentioned and then explained in detail, even though initially there was no intention to tell them, is connected with mechanisms playing a crucial role in the narrative account. Schütze has observed that in the extempore narration three types of constraints are at work: (1) the constraint to condense, (2) the constraint to go into details, and (3) the constraint to close the textual forms. The constraint to condense refers to the impossibility to 'tell everything'. The narrator is driven to tell only what is relevant to the overall meaning of the story. In most cases, since there is no ready-made script, life events and situations need to be selected and evaluated while narrating. The constraint to go into details means that once an event has been mentioned, the narrator feels compelled to link it to other events belonging to the same chain of experience. In consequence, much is said, in even more detail, than initially intended. The constraint to close textual forms leads the narrator to finish an episode, an interactive situation or a chapter in his/her life story. This implies closing up the embedded patterns of experience and presentation. Experiences or parts of experiences which are difficult to talk about, because the individual feels guilty or hurt in connection with them, are usually then put in so-called background constructions: narrated events or extended argumentation as part of the background of the main storyline. During extempore storytelling the three constraints are in constant competition (Schütze, 2008a: 16; Kallmeyer and Schütze, 1977) and only in cases where the story is told repeatedly can their succession be harmonised and polished. To put it in a nutshell, the constraints promote narrations with specific formal features and allow analysis of the dominating biographical processes of the case and its structural conditions.

The autobiographical narrative interview method enables the process character of life experiences to be grasped, from their initial stages to their consequences, and observation of how people react when contingencies occur. In the autobiographical account, actions are placed in specific social contexts which form out of preceding activities of the individual, and from reactions of interacting partners towards these and other situational

conditions, such as a surrounding organisational structure, a mentality structure that dominates the environment, or institutional structures. The extempore autobiographical narration is structured by these social frames as well as by the sequence of events and experiences, termed 'cognitive figures' (Schütze, 2005 [1984]). Moreover and above this level, the narrative receives its structure from supra-segmental units: the biographical process structures that encompass more than single experiences. They reflect an inner change of the narrator connected to incisive biographical events, which form overarching units with regard to the quality of experience.

Four biographical process structures are defined in the theory of biographical analysis:

(a) The 'trajectory of suffering', the biographical process structure that presents a counter-principle to the mode of intentional action (the conventional model of action). For example, difficult experiences of dealing with cultural strangeness and generally speaking, all kinds of harmful, disappointing, irritating experiences that are biographically relevant and that contradict the individual's expectations carry the risk of promoting a biographical process structure of suffering, in which the individual's self-identity becomes progressively undermined. If this experiential quality becomes dominant in the biography, it will show in a gradual loss of the individual's ability to understand the situational factors determining his or her social situation, and to deal adequately and decisively with these detrimental developments. Another characteristic feature of the trajectory of suffering is that these difficulties (in social relationships, work situations) are then bypassed, faded out of awareness or even fully veiled, and hence escalate further due to such suboptimal behaviour. The trajectory of suffering can develop until the individual experiences an orientational collapse. In order to recover and to get the detrimental developments under control (which is easier of course before the biographical situation destabilises), professional helpers and significant others who help the individual to look at his life and difficulties in a realistic way and who can give biographical advice, become crucial.

(b) In contrast, the individual's self-identity becomes creative in the 'metamorphosis' process structure in which she or he gains new competences in the course of dealing with new experiences. The example of Hanne described further illustrates such a metamorphosis experience.

(c) This applies also to the 'intentional' process structure, the biographical action scheme in which the individual pursues an action plan, stays sensitive towards unexpected developments and the need to deal with contingencies in a creative and circumspect ways.

(d) Finally, there is the process structure of an orientation towards institutional patterns which is more or less neutral, but which bears the potential to develop into a trajectory of suffering if the individual does not meet institutional expectations.

Compared to other interview techniques, the material obtained during the autobiographical narrative interview is quite distinct, due to the particular dynamics of the interview situation. Since only a broad question is asked at the beginning, the interviewee is free to decide what, how and how much is going to be said. At the same time, while narrating, the interviewees become carried away by their life stories if they follow the 'flow of experience' in their recollection (Schütze, 2005 [1984]). For some narrators, the biographical method opens up space for deep reflection as they use the interview time to remember and re-experience emotionally powerful interactions with people, places and things. Introducing elements of their life story, they join various episodes in their lives, sometimes surprising themselves as new connections are made, and the *gestalt* of their biographical unfolding begins to show. This is the point where biographical work, understood as a process that is intended to establish or re-establish ultimate meaning for one's own existence, for everyday life situations and significant social relationships, begins (Schütze, 1992).

The stimulus in the Euroidentities project

When developing the research design for the Euroidentities project, an important consideration was whether 'ordinary' citizens of Europe, when asked to tell their life story, would mention Europe at all. Hence, the idea was to question people who were in some way sensitised to Europe, assuming that Europe would play a role in the unfolding of their biographies. The core criterion for the formulation of the stimulus was the principle that the life story as a whole was of research interest. However, to get autobiographical-narrative data that would show European experiences in sufficient detail, we felt that the informants needed to be encouraged to dwell on those experiences in their life story that were connected to Europe, such as travelling and learning in Europe; work, partnerships and friendships with people from other European countries; the development of transnational projects in Europe; or experience with European institutional conditions (as is typical for the work and lives of farmers). At this point we had to deal with the paradox of letting the informants be free to tell their life history with all the experience that they themselves find relevant, while at the same time it seemed necessary to obtain stories of experiences with European content. Actually this proved to be an unnecessary concern, due to a series of actions done before the interview, to clarify the aims of the research, starting from the first contact, either by the researcher herself/ himself or a mediator. Interviewees were told that the aim of the research project was to find out about the role of Europe in the everyday life of citizens of the European Union. Secondly, informants were told that they had been approached because they belonged to groups that usually have dealings with Europe, and due to their own probable experience with European contexts, such as exchange study/cultural programmes, work abroad, EU subsidies

for agriculture, and so on. The purpose of the project was explained to our interviewees so that they could give informed consent. In addition, at the beginning of the interview, the researcher said something about her or his own personal background and involvement in the project.

It is important to emphasise, in line with the colloquial nature of the biographical narrative interview that the national teams and individual researchers had their own stimulus formulations, adjusted to the particular needs of the interview situation, and to the way the informant was responding (going along, asking for further clarifications and so on). Standardised presentations with 'fixed' written texts were avoided, since they would have created an artificiality which would not fit with the informant's task, namely the expectation to talk about her- or himself in an off-the-cuff narrative, in personal terms. The central constraint with regard to the stimulus issue was the necessity to elicit the narration of the whole biography, together with the interviewee's experience framed particularly by European contexts of various kinds. The following stimulus formulation was developed, although as already mentioned it was integrated into a spontaneous verbal presentation:

We would like to find out something about the ways in which Europe plays a role in the lives of people. That means people who had experiences during their trips and during their stay in other European countries or who had dealt with European topics in one way or the other. It is only possible for our research project to get a sense of the significance of such experiences – and what Europe means in the lives of people like you – if you share with me what has happened in your life. It would be great if you would tell me your life history. You should take into account that I am very interested in your *whole* life history – that includes your personal and private experiences. Please tell me about your life. You may do so, of course, if you came across European phenomena in your life and they did matter for you, by also drawing on your experiences in Europe and with Europe. Please tell me how your life has developed, how it started and how it has unfolded until today – step by step.

The formulation of the stimulus has significant effects on the narrative production. Therefore, it is important to take into account how the stimulus has been presented. Recording has to begin right away (with the informant's consent) at the point when the researcher introduces him- or herself and the project and presents the stimulus, once the brief conversational phase before the interview has ended. This was necessary to assess the consequences of our introductions for the unfolding of the main narrative. If the main narrative did not sufficiently address the informant's activities connected with Europe, the narrative questions posed after the coda to the main story could address the issue of the informant's life-historical entanglement in

such contexts, work fields, environments, and projects. Although a central concern at the beginning of the project was whether and in what way our interviewees would mention Europe or European issues in their narratives, these doubts gradually disappeared. Almost all our interviews revealed topics and experiences that were either explicitly addressed as European, for example migrants who talked about experiencing work difficulties in other EU countries, or had a more 'hidden' character, with respect to Europe as a frame of reference for women's rights, the absence of war, or democratic principles.

Methodological openness: The analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews

The autobiographical narrative method has been the methodological core of the Euroidentities project. Throughout the three years of international cooperation the attempt was made not only to collect empirical material in the mode of the autobiographical narrative interview, but to generate a general methodological and theoretical point of view about how to deal with the material collected. While the data gathering approach was fairly standardised throughout the project, the analysis of the biographical material turned out to be more complex. The diversity of analytical procedures and methodological approaches across the project contributed to a debate on the autobiographical method's potential for theory generation. This section of the chapter focuses on the analysis of autobiographical narrative material. Firstly, it discusses the formal analysis procedures in the tradition of Fritz Schütze. Secondly, it explores additional analytical perspectives which were used as main approaches by some of the Euroidentities teams.

Most importantly, the autobiographical narrative represents the dynamic relation between the individual self and society. According to McAdams (2008: 243) 'the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class and culture at large'. In this sense the autobiographical narrative is a unit of analysis which represents the multidimensional and very complex universe of social relations. The sequential structural analysis of the biographical content as well as the formal features of the text reveals complex and profound process structures and their conditions of social life. Additionally, more extended analysis of the specifics of the sensitised groups allowed for understanding of the biographical dimension of Europe.

Structural analysis

The formal structural analysis offers a deep insight into the processes and mechanisms of interaction between individual and society. 'In practice, this means that in biographical research first of all the abductive and innovative

aspect is unfolded during the research process by following the research strategies of Grounded Theory as a methodological framework concept, in order to anchor a theory in empirical material' (Apitzsch and Siouti, 2007: 11). The most significant of the Euroidentities findings summarised in this book such as European mental space, European opportunity structures, and European professional arenas, are the outcomes of sequential structural analysis with regard to the content and formal features.

The autobiographical narrative interview is based on spontaneous extempore storytelling completed with some additional questioning concerning gaps and ambiguities in the sequence of recapitulated events and an inquiry into issues relevant for the research topic (in this case, attitudes towards Europe). Each meticulously transcribed autobiographical interview is subjected to a structural analysis, which usually involves teamwork in order to triangulate reading-perspectives and hence to outline the different social (including biographical) conditions of the unfolding case. The analysis of biographical data follows four basic general methodological assumptions and procedures: reconstruction, abduction, sequentiality and reflexivity. According to Apitzsch and Siouti (2007:11) 'case reconstructive methods follow an abductive logic and proceed in a methodological way that avoids confronting the empirical material with predefined systems and variables and classifications'. Instead, formal markers of the narration as well as content analysis of narrative units in their specific sequential order are the only empirical basis for generating relevant process categories that shed light on the case-specific dynamics of the biographical unfolding. This analytical procedure can be illustrated with a brief example.²

At the age of 17 Hanne from Germany travelled to Norway for a year when she was at high school (today she is 25 years old). In the relevant interview segment, about two transcript pages long, Hanne talks about new experiences with history lessons at school and, connected with this recollection, about long-term effects of the Second World War in encounters with Norwegians. The respective narrative unit encompasses several sub-segments. The structure of the unit will now be outlined, and two kernel narrative segments will be analysed extensively.

Hanne begins the segment by marking the experience she is going to talk about as 'very exciting'. With it, she uses metamorphosis language that reflects experiences with novel impact. In the first sub-segment Hanne starts to compare history lessons in Norway to history teaching in Germany. Hanne explains that she had been fascinated by the fact that different historical periods are assigned to different grades at school, and hence there would be no repetitions and omissions as was the case at school in Germany. A striking formal feature of this sub-segment, which runs through the entire segment,

² The case of Hanne is dealt with more fully in Chapter 8, on cultural contacts, which places the text segments analysed here into the full biographical context.

should be noted. There are several argumentative passages which show that while she is narrating Hanne is assessing the biographical relevance of her new experiences of different social practices in Norway. With these pieces of reflection Hanne does ongoing 'biographical work'. By bringing these experiences to mind it becomes possible for the narrator to perceive helpful conditions in life, such as the importance of a liberal education structure in Norway. Likewise, it is also possible to 'see' difficult experiences in their complex procedural conditions. The experiences can then be integrated into the (theoretical) view of one's biography and become an important learning resource. In the evaluation of the sub-segment Hanne emphasises the specialty of the field of knowledge of the ancient history of Norway. Although she does not state it explicitly, this insider knowledge enables her as a cultural stranger to find another way to access the country's culture and its inhabitants.

In the next, longer sub-segment Hanne tells of a difficult experience, namely that as a German she was time and again confronted with the history of the Second World War. The young woman explains that this was an expect-able experience for her. During previous holidays in Scandinavian countries she learned to be regarded as German and to be saluted with 'Heil Hitler', connoting a negative collective national identity. This experience is irritating for Hanne, and in order to explain this insulting reaction to herself and thus to be able to integrate this experience without an undermining impact on her self-identity, Hanne uses her ability to take the perspective of the cultural other who has a different historical background. Hanne understands that this insulting reaction has structural reasons; and that it is connected with a great strength of collective remembering in Norway regarding German soldiers and the atrocities of Nazi Germany during occupation. It is noteworthy that an in-depth experience regarding this problematic labelling of national collective identity can still create a divide between young people. Hanne describes in the subsequent sub-segment that a female friend is not willing to take her to her home because this friend feels unsure about how her grandmother, who suffered under German soldiers during the Second World War, would react.

This narrative kernel sub-segment begins with the kernel narrative sentence:

But to her house I could – that it would be difficult, because her grand- mother would also live in their house and she [the girl-friend] would not know exactly how her grandmother would react to it. [Hanne's visit]

Hanne tells about her own reaction:

And then I thought: Well, then just not.

Hanne feels obviously hurt by not being invited to her friend's house. However, she is willing to overcome this hurtful experience when she

learns from another friend that the granddaughter is willing to become friends with Hanne, but finds it complicated due to her grandmother's well-being. In this difficult situation, Hanne starts to deal consciously with the question of what conditions could promote such a depreciative reaction by the grandmother. In other words, Hanne attempts to take the perspective of the grandmother who was a victim of the Nazis and as a consequence may have lost the ability to differentiate between generations, their roles and responsibility regarding wartime crimes. Hanne says:

Well, so that – I can understand it. If you lived during these times that – somehow it can be, that one then – can no longer change one's outlook, and cannot say, 'Ok, she has nothing to do with that time. She is just – German.'

In order to check if this generalising explanation proves plausible, Hanne compares this imagined reaction of the grandmother with how her own great-grandfather behaved. Hanne arrives at the conclusion that old people who had very difficult experiences in former times might suffer later on from forms of obstinacy, and lose the ability to see things from a different angle.

–ehm– I knew that from my great-grandfather, here in Germany, who had Alzheimer's disease and who said very bad things. Things that you would not say nowadays, but he just simply because he was too old to realize that this time was over.

However, in the next sub-segment, the situation of meeting the grandmother unfolds differently to what Hanne expected. By chance Hanne meets her friend's grandmother, who is delighted to get to know Hanne. The grandmother explains that it would be wonderful if young Germans would travel to Norway. The grandmother turns out to be very open-minded and is interested to learn something about Germany today and about how Germany deals with these former crimes.

The great thing was then that by a stupid or good chance, however, I met this grandma someday. ((happy)) And this grandma was totally excited about it, that nowadays German teenagers go to Norway, look at it and how great and how exciting; and 'Please tell me something about Germany. And how is it now? How do you deal with it? Oh how wonderful' ((laughing amused +)) And my girlfriend was just sitting next to us and thought: ((heavy, surprised swallowing)) OK (+). So like that. Totally underestimated Grandma. / So!

In the final evaluation of this sub-segment Hanne starts with a biographical commentary showing that this encounter was a very impressive experience

for her. It becomes clear that she underwent a metamorphosis experience which shows in that she gains new competency in cultural understanding: She becomes sensitised to the power of collective remembering in Norway regarding Germany soldiers (and their children) and to the phenomenon of herself being emotionally subdued by this topic of Norwegian collective memory.

–ehm– For me it was really a wonderful experience, because a lot of bad – not so much, but I had so – well somehow humorous and ... ((depressed)) Well, it was also up to the – I think up to the seventies, in Norway it was the case that the children whose fathers were German soldiers did not receive any child benefit, no support.

Elsewhere in the segment Hanne deals with the question whether she, being German, would have the right to be proud of ‘her’ nation (as compared to the pride of many Norwegians of their country). At the end of the segment, having done this kind of biographical work (with a European dimension!), Hanne draws the conclusion that, being German would mean not only having to accept the burden of history as part of one’s own collective history, but having the task as a young German to transmit a new impression of Germany to other European countries. The quintessence of this segment is a different view on living in Europe. For Hanne, Europe becomes relevant as a place in which people have to get to know each other under present conditions, in order to learn from each other and to live with each other peacefully. To put Hanne’s idea in another way, one could say that what European history commissions is a promotion of individual learning processes merging with collective identity work and memory.

This example shows that the analysis of narrative units involves systematic comparison of the narrative passages with other kinds of text as they appear in the segments, such as argumentations and theoretical commentaries respectively. It shows that the structural description of the single narrative units leads to the identification of biographical process structures and their specific impact on the narrator’s identity.

There are four analytical steps forming the inductive process which enables theoretical generalisation from a single autobiographical narrative towards more general elements of social reality. First, the overall biographical structuring of single cases allows a focus on the analytical case-relevant process structures and categories. The second step of the analysis concentrates on analytical abstraction and aims to find other case-relevant social mechanisms that seem to play a role in the unfolding of the case (like the power of collective memory). Systematic case comparison forms step three of the analytical procedure. It focuses the analysis on finding minimal and maximal contrasting cases. This procedure helps distinguish the variety and internal dynamics of the social mechanisms. In the final step a theoretical model is built,

wherein the social (including biographical) conditions are systematised into a coherent argument which aims to answer the research question. Preliminary ideas, hypotheses and emerging theories are open to modification and completion up to the point where any new case does not change the architecture and decisive content of the theoretical model anymore. In moving from a single case analysis to generalised theoretical concepts, it is essential to follow the methodological procedure of 'pragmatic embedding' (Schütze, 2008a). This is based on continuous comparison of the formal structure of the autobiographical text (how the narration is produced) with its content (what is said in the narration). There is systematic interplay of reported events with modes of their internal experiencing and ways of interpreting, and their relation to biographical process structures in the life course and social processes occurring within the life course, as well as to the individual's biography as a whole. Through an ongoing process of confronting abstract categories with new pieces of data, the categories are being empirically controlled, differentiated, backed up or put in doubt; new categories emerge, and the whole model is being continually respecified so that it becomes denser and moves towards 'theoretical saturation' (Riemann and Schütze, 1987: 64).

The analysis of collective phenomena in biographies

In individual life courses various references to collectivities take place (Schröder-Wildhagen and Schütze, 2011). Although this relating to collectivities in the individual life course seems to be fairly self-evident, since the individual in the unfolding of his or her biography needs to deal with the impact of different collective entities, until now qualitative social research has not fully explored the chance to do structural analysis of all those collective structures, frames and entities as experienced in the individual biography. The analysis of social frames such as peers, families, social relationships, especially relationships to significant others, and – on the meso level – of social worlds, social arenas, and organisations has been done with biographical data and autobiographical-narrative interviews respectively; for example, in the fields of health studies, professional work, social work, teachers' work, migration and gender studies. However, the so-called macro-level to which the national and supra-national, including the European, belongs, appears to be quite remote from analysis of biographical developments. Our initial interviews with informants from the Europe-sensitised groups revealed that it is not just quite concrete collective entities and structures such as families, milieux, gender, that are conditioning social frames in the biography. While collective phenomena such as nation, Europe and other parts of the world seem at first glance to be quite abstract factors, they also emerged in the autobiographical narratives as conditioning social frames and points of reference having definable impact on biographical development: either promoting productive biographical action schemes and metamorphosis processes, or, conversely, having detrimental influences on the individual life course.

For the individual in general, in order to be able to pursue biographical plans and action schemes, it is an important life task to find a stance towards these collectivities and their expectations and influences. The example of Hanne illustrates how the individual in certain life situations needs to deal with collective structures and entities, such as national we-groups to which one belongs or which play a role in one's life, and to find a stance towards these in order to develop and/or continue biographical action schemes. Individuals need to reflexively distance themselves from, fight against, flee or (eventually) accept the shaping influences of collective entities and find clarity about their impact upon biographical development (cf. Schütze, 1992, 2008a/b). This is an important part of biographical work. When doing research on collective phenomena which are relevant for identity development, the researcher needs to take into account that identity development takes place in interactive processes and is itself a reflexive process. Biographical work means the reflexive-argumentative work on one's self-historical development, by which the individual becomes able to understand identity changes he or she has undergone during biographical development and, at the same time, becomes able to stay identical with herself or himself. The individual that has experiences in Europe – in Dewey's sense of 'Making an experience' (Dewey, 1998 [1934]: Chapter III) – undergoes new situations that may lead to productive metamorphosis processes in the course of deep learning processes resulting in new skills and capabilities of getting along and understanding the national-cultural other, of working and living together in new national-cultural settings, of looking through complex social situations, understanding their social dynamics and conditions in new cultural contexts, and of realising these new skills as part of biographical identity. Conversely, difficult and even very painful experiences might be the main character of the 'European experiences': hurtful stigmatisation and social seclusion, prosecution in another European country, war experiences, broken intimate relationships, and so on. Hence, analytical attention towards experiences of suffering is required. This includes the researcher paying attention to the phenomenon that the individual is forced to deal with such incisive painful and difficult experiences, in order to control the undermining effects on self-identity and to be able to change an unhappy biographical situation. However, when the experiences with collectivities have the quality of a metamorphosis process, the individual needs to deal deliberately with these so that he or she can get a clear idea about how to further develop his or her unique potentials and how to put these into practice in the course of a stable biographical action scheme.

The individual who starts to reflect on specific experiences or on the life course as a whole and hence starts biographical work makes use of his or her own life story. To narrate one's biography is the medium for the individual to recognise experiences in their sequential order. By realising this order, the contextual conditions of experiences can be grasped and

the individual becomes enabled to draw conclusions about the social (including biographical) conditions of his or her living situation that may have developed into a trap or can be a creative situation. This can be 'seen' by narrating one's life story. When the total biography is being told and brought to mind, it fulfils the 'paradoxical task' of the individual, to reconcile transforming experiences and to stay identical with oneself.

To do such biographical work becomes especially necessary in the face of difficulties due to being part of a collective entity, when one feels burdened by the collectivity's implicit as well as sometimes quite explicit expectations and impact in general. Of course, collectivities and we-groups can often also have a stabilising impact. In any case, the individual will usually start to reflect consciously about his or her relation to these collective entities and expectations only when conflicts arise between the individual's biographical decisions and collective expectations – for example, influential national we-groups and their stances as reflected in the family, or by the individual's peer group. In such situations the individual can feel an urgent need to reflect on and practically understand what would be helpful as well as hindering aspects and conditions of the respective collective frames, such as peers, family, national living and working conditions and mentality structures, as well as the impact of Europe, like the chance to travel and work freely, to find out about different cultures, or to pursue projects on a European-wide level, on his or her life course and biographical identity.

Additional analytical perspectives

While the sequential analysis of the autobiographical narrative was the methodological core of the project, some research teams also referred to other biographical analytical methods, namely BNIM and narrative ethnography. Additionally, the social constructivist approach linked to the conceptual assumptions of Pierre Bourdieu was employed within the analytical procedures. Along with the formal analysis these approaches to autobiographical material enriched the understanding of European phenomena.

Biographical-Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM)

The *Biographical-Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM)* was established and popularised in the British context by Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne starting from the 1990s. According to Wengraf (2010: 48) 'BNIM started off as an off-shoot of the interviewing method of Fritz Schütze, combined with the interpretive methods of Öevermann (objective hermeneutic micro-analysis) and Wolfram Fischer (temporality) as worked over and crystallised by Rosenthal and others associated with the Berlin *Quatext* group'. The method developed further in the course of the *SOSTRIS* project with the methodological contribution of Roswitha Breckner, working with Gabriele Rosenthal. In BNIM, the analyst seeks to make a reconstruction of the *gestalt* of the life and of the narrative (Rosenthal, 1993), which is based on the assumption that the so called *lived life* (or *life history*) and *told life*

(or *life story*) are dialectically linked and influenced by each other. Therefore, the analytical process is conducted on a twofold level: in the first case (analysis of *lived life*, also called *genetic analysis*) the purpose 'is the reconstruction of the biographical meaning of experiences at the time they happened, and the reconstruction of the chronological sequence of experiences in which they occurred'; while in the second case (analysis of the narrated life story or *told story*) 'the purpose is the reconstruction of the temporal order of the life story in the present time of narrating' (Rosenthal, 1993: 60). The comparison of the *lived* and *told* life represents the core of the analytical process, since it is from confronting these two different levels of analysis that the structure of the case derives. Indeed, the hermeneutic reconstruction of the case is directed at finding out the rules that social actors follow both in shaping and perceiving the sequence of actions of their lives.

Before proceeding to illustrate BNIM in practice, we must point out that the analytical process is based on two main principles: (1) the principle of *reconstruction* that, in a typical abductive way, goes from the explication of a social sequence to a more general structural type; (2) the principle of *sequentialisation* based on the idea that each action and/or each segment of narration, constitutes a choice within a range of possible alternatives. In practice, following Rosenthal (1993), the whole process of biographical analysis unfolds through five steps:

(a) *Analysis of the biographical data*: consists in organising and analysing the data extracted from the whole text of the interview in the chronological order in which they occurred; in sum, it is the 'real' chronology of the life history. In this phase, 'outside data' are also taken into account and used in the form of field notes, general observations and document analysis, to frame the single case in a more general societal and historical context.

(b) *Thematic field analysis* (reconstruction of the *told life*): unlike the previous phase, this is focused on the analysis of the material in the order in which it was presented by the interviewee, following his or her system of relevance. This step of the analysis is addressed at delineating the reasons for which some themes are mentioned, some only hinted at, while others are omitted. Behind these narrative choices of the interviewee, there is a sort of 'hidden agenda' (a not always conscious structuring principle) to be found after the sequentialisation of the main narration. In this phase, once the text has been sequentialised in narrative units, the researcher is still allowed to formulate hypotheses subsequently to be verified or falsified.

(c) *Reconstruction of life history*: concerns the 'experienced life', aiming at the comprehension of the biographical meanings attributed by the interviewee to events when they occurred (the past perspective).

(d) *Microanalysis of individual text segments*: 'breaking up the verbatim text of the interview into *very small chunks* (datum bits) and performing the same activity of multiplying (then verifying) hypotheses about who is

speaking, what they are experiencing, and what will happen next in the interview if the hypotheses are true' (Wengraf, 2001: 292–3). This implies the validation of all the previous hypotheses developed in the light of a text sequence considered particularly meaningful which is analysed in detail.

(e) *Contrastive comparison of life history and life story*: is the phase in which the structure of the case, or the interpretative key to the case finally emerges. By comparing the dimensions of life history and life story, the researcher is able to get the main plot of the story between the present perspective (how the biographer has chosen to tell his/her story) and the past perspective (the dynamics of the case evolution). In other words, the question about the logic of the case can be posed as follows: 'why did an individual who lived his/her life like this, tell his/her story like that?'

The first main purpose of the BNIM process of analysis is the reconstruction of a single case. The comparative analysis of several cases can lead to typology building and further theorising. Following this perspective, the structuring principles which are identified are compared subsequently across the other interviews.

Narrative ethnography

The sequential analysis of autobiographical narratives, as well as BNIM, is strongly focused on the way an individual perceives the world through experience. Narrative ethnography reflects a different logic of inference from narrative data. This method of analysis was introduced in the American context by Gubrium and Holstein for analysis of individual narratives, including life stories. The narrative ethnographic approach assumes that biographical narratives at the micro level of the individual life story resonate with the framework of 'macro level narratives', stories relevant to a given culture and time. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2009: 7), 'if stories in society reflect inner life and social worlds, society has a way of shaping, reshaping, or otherwise influencing stories on its own terms'. In that way the narratives heard and told around the individual in everyday life, stories of family history, school education, media outputs, all become a part of individual life stories enclosed in the autobiographical narratives.

The analytical steps of the narrative ethnography require understanding of the cultural context in which they have been produced. The international character of the Euroidentities project allowed for this sort of inquiry. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2008: 250), narrative ethnography as a methodological approach concerned with 'the production, distribution and circulation of stories in society requires that we step outside of narrative material and consider questions such as who produces particular stories, where they are likely to be encountered, what their consequences are, under what circumstances particular narratives are more or less accountable,

what interests publicise them, how they gain popularity, and how they are challenged'. Many stories deal with the membership of individuals in collectivities as shaped by various cultural contexts. In the Euroidentities project part of the analysis focused on the evolution of attachments and a sense of belonging. These were especially relevant across countries, generations and levels of education and occupation. The application of narrative ethnography to autobiographical data analysis helped capture the dynamics between 'the concept of Europe' and the narratives of national history. In these terms Europe is strongly present in many German narratives as an antidote for war and the guardian of peace, whereas in narratives from the UK Europe refers to the 'continent', a place 'out there' commonly associated with holidays in Spain or France, recently a source of migrant workers and international professionals, as well as institutional EU regulations concerning freedom of movement or agricultural subsidies. In that context Polish diasporic narratives refer to Europe in terms of opportunity structures for work and education. These different impacts of larger historical narratives are embedded in the stories and languages, history and mass media.

The social constructivist perspective

The social constructivist approach, in combination with an ontological understanding which sees agency and structure as densely intertwined in a dual, reciprocal relationship (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Giddens, 1997 [1984]; Bourdieu, 1999 [1972]), concentrates on explicating how different practices and mental structures are shaped by structural conditions, and how these structures are simultaneously shaped by agency. Like narrative ethnography, apart from 'hard' structures, this approach also considers mental structures in the form of socially shared meanings. This particular approach is anchored in the presumption that the focus of biographical analysis is the representations of meaning attributed to the past (or future) experiences rather than the experience as such. Hence attention is paid to the ways in which individual representations of past experiences lead to the practices which follow, how they inform biographical plans and actions, and how these processes are interrelated with structural circumstances characteristic of respective temporal-spatial contexts. Within social constructivist analysis it is important to investigate how an interviewee interprets her/his biographical experiences during the interview in order to understand how previous practices are interconnected across the fields of individual conduct.

Similarly to formal structural analysis, the first stage of the analysis is to make sense of the sequence of events in the interviewee's life story and to understand the meaning given to these different events by the interviewee. As suggested by the constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, open coding, exploring whatever theoretically relevant categories can be discerned in the data is conducted in this phase of the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Categories or themes are developed as derived from the data, leading to

an analytical frame enabling theoretical explanation of the biographical narratives in the sample and possibly to typology construction. Compared to formal structural analysis the approach is less concerned with text structures and linguistic elements and more with analytical categories or themes derived from the data and considered relevant to the research aims. Compared with narrative ethnography, social constructivist analysis focuses more on the way interviewees interpret their biographical experiences and less on the composition of the story and the process of storytelling. The social constructivist approach emphasises particularly the importance of reflexivity. During the process of analysis it is important to acknowledge explicitly the interaction between the researcher (placed in the field as a participant as well as an observer) and the research material. Whereas the researcher should abstain from imposing predefined classifications and typologies on the material, the analysis process is always situated within specific professional as well as broader social contexts, so imposing a constant burden on the researcher to reflect on the preconceived ideas and conceptualisations a research agenda and process always entails.

Except for the analytical differences between the approaches presented earlier, the common ground for these distinct methodological traditions was created by the Grounded Theory tradition, which lately has been developed in different directions to meet distinct epistemological assumptions. While the formal structural analysis as well as the classical Grounded Theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) remain close to realism, the social constructivist approach, as the name suggests, shares its epistemological basis with the Constructivist Grounded Theory method developed by Charmaz in 2006 on the basis of original works of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and developed later by Strauss and Corbin (1996). The collaboration between academics from different traditions during the Euroidentities project was significantly facilitated by analytical workshops organised at different stages of the research process. Before the meetings each team would prepare some analyses and distribute the transcripts of interviews they were working on. Different analytical approaches and interpretations were confronted during the workshops, stimulating the discussions and enhancing each other.

Working with the autobiographical narrative interview – a view from ‘the kitchen’

Conducting autobiographical narrative interviews is to some extent a paradoxical endeavour, where two strangers meet but only one of them is expected to talk at length and to open up his or her personal experiences. It creates certain imbalances, which are difficult or even impossible to reduce. But the fact that most likely it is a once only encounter between strangers makes it possible to reveal experiences and emotions which are known only to a very small number of significant others or perhaps not

even shared with anybody else. Visiting the life world of an interviewee means that a researcher is often confronted with the unfamiliar, and may see logic and opinions different to his or her own. A critical role is played by the researcher's ability to maintain an open, non-judgemental attitude, and to take the perspective of the other.

In the following section we reflect on the theoretical but also very practical aspects of applying the methods, which we call the 'the view from the kitchen'. Paraphrasing Merton (1978), the idea of a 'sincere chronicle' of the research process encourages us to share with readers the difficulties we encountered, ethical issues we had to deal with and the lessons we learnt. Three basic and paradoxical problems of qualitative research work accompanied us: the problem of the vagueness of the sample; the intimacy of the interview situation; and, the problem of beginners who do autobiographical-narrative interviews.

Selecting and contacting interviewees

In the autobiographical narrative interview method, as generally in qualitative methods, sampling is not aimed at achieving statistical representativeness, but is focused instead on representing the analytical categories in question ('theoretical representativeness'). Following the theoretical sampling procedures that underpin Grounded Theory research (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1996), respondents are identified to represent specific phenomena, and the conditions that construct them. To study the formation and evolution of European identity we needed to select individuals who were expected to be sensitised to the processes of European identity development, so that we could identify the conditions that influence such development, as well as the various forms it takes. The five initial sensitised groups (of educationally mobile people, transnational workers, cultural contacts, farmers and members of civil society organisations) and the two formulated subsequently (those in a cross-cultural intimate relationship and those coming from outside Europe) gave the sampling frame of the study. The choice of respondents depended on the relevance of their experience to the sensitised group. The defining features of the sensitised groups were quite broad and covered very different phenomena. This has led to various ways of exploring phenomena that would fit the defining features: for example, social contacts ranging from intimate contacts up to quite formal phenomena, such as contacts in the French-German military corps. This sampling strategy turned out to be a creative process, going in various and sometimes surprising directions.

Depending on the sensitised group, we used two main routes to contact respondents:

- *Contact through official institutions or organisations.* For the purpose of the research we needed to use formal intermediaries to connect us to

potential respondents like administrative institutions or well known organisations associated with our target research groups, such as civil society establishments, national farmers' unions or Erasmus offices in universities. We made contact with these organisations, which then provided more information and put us in touch with some of the interviewees. Sometimes it was possible to contact informants of interest for our sample directly.

- *Through personal networks.* Another successful way to contact people for a biographical interview was to utilise researchers' networks in various fields: university, family, friends, and so on. Most transnational workers, many educationally mobile individuals, people with cross-cultural intimate relations and farmers were contacted in this way. In some cases we used the personal contacts and networks of our respondents who were willing after the end of an interview to 'recommend' us to other people who might be interesting for our research. This provided easy access to individuals as the contact was based on preliminary trust.

Work in the field was constantly controlled by the principle of theoretical sampling (Strauss and Corbin, 1996: 148–68). Thematic criteria for the selection of our next cases were developed from the analysis of our first interviews. For example, it proved relevant for the analysis in the sensitised group of CSO workers to interview informants from different generations. The first two interviews (in particular of Polish and German informants) showed that there were differences in the way the interviewees were looking at and making use of Europe when directly affected by the Second World War (generation of the 'grandparents') as compared to the generation of the 'parents', who grew up in the politically divided post war-Europe with its great material imbalances. Further differences showed when these findings were compared to the generation of the 'grandchildren' who act today in an already highly developed European institutional structure. Another example for the practice of theoretical sampling in the sensitised group of farmers was a comparison again between generations (fathers and sons) who showed differences in their attitudes towards the question of how to modernise the farm and as regards their orientations towards Europe. The comparison between organic farmers and conventional farmers also appeared to be relevant with regard to understanding meanings of Europe and thus for getting closer to the theoretical variance in our samples. In the group of transnational workers, it turned out to be an interesting question and necessary to validate our tentative theoretical categories to understand how migrants coming from outside of Europe would comment on their migration experiences and if, and how far, Europe would appear relevant to them. The comparison between cases that started with analysis during early field work yielded several case-inherent criteria of distinction which controlled further selection of cases in order to arrive at the full theoretical variance of our samples.

Intimacy of the interview situation: Personal experiences and lessons learned

Methodological skills

The autobiographical narrative interview method is very demanding, both for the interviewer and the interviewee, physically, as well as emotionally. The interview sessions are usually long, sometimes lasting several hours, and, as they are undirected, can take unexpected turns and reveal harrowing experiences. It is often difficult to remain both professionally detached but also sympathetic and understanding.

The main practical skill in biographical interviewing is certainly to be an attentive listener – particularly in the first phase of the story telling when the interviewer is silent, in order not to interrupt or direct the narration, but at the same time showing, through body language, genuine interest in what is being said. For an inexperienced interviewer it could be hard to get out of the habit of ‘participating’ in a conversation and demonstrating involvement by commenting or asking questions. As the content and form of the narrative is very sensitive to the actual interview stimulus and reactions of the interviewer, extra care needs to be taken to limit possible intrusive effects. For some of us, less experienced researchers, it was difficult to listen to the story and simultaneously to identify its structural frame, so as to come up with relevant questions for the subsequent analysis. Although in the first part of the interview it is appropriate to take very short and quick notes to be used as hints and clues to formulate questions in the next steps, it could be detrimental to make these notes too conspicuous and time consuming, because the respondent could find this distracting. Lengthy note taking could make them feel they did not clarify something, or had said something of particular importance that they are unaware of, thus putting the free flow of the narrative in jeopardy. On the other hand, informants who tell their life story as a whole for the first time in their life often talk about it as an illuminating and liberating experience. The fact that the undisturbed and unmanipulated telling of one’s life story gradually makes the shape or *gestalt* of the interviewee’s life visible, is often moving for the informant as well as for the recipient. With it, the interviewee gets a chance to see new connections between the events in his/her life and to start/continue biographical work.

Every interview method relies on building rapport with the respondent, but the nature of the biographical narrative interview, founded on tapping into deeply personal and emotional experiences, calls for a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee in which the respondent does not feel judged or criticised, but safe and understood. In a situation where the narrator feels the interviewer is judgemental, disrespectful or comes with a hidden agenda, trust in the interviewer could easily be lost and important parts of the life story remain undisclosed. Part of building rapport in this method is the ability to convince the respondent (verbally or non-verbally)

that their story is interesting to the researcher, and that everything that is relevant to them is relevant to the researcher as well. This might help to ease the constraint upon the respondent to condense the narrative, as they would feel encouraged to share their thoughts. It is important that every opportunity is used from the very first contact to underline and to emphasise the bottom-up perspective of the research, pointing out that the research interest is not to contact 'special', 'privileged' or 'representative' informants. In a few cases when we interviewed people without a high level of education, we had to calm their anxiety, making them understand that their story was interesting for our research even though they were not experts on European issues.

When preparing our informants for the interview situation it was important to explain that, contrary to common expectations, it was not going to be a standard question-answer format. The interviewees were given more freedom, space and time, needed for the unfolding of their life histories. Also, it is very beneficial if the researcher is acquainted with any past experiences interviewees may have had that might influence the trust relationship with the interviewer – for example, if they have had unpleasant interrogative experiences or have reasons to be distrustful of persons, representative figures and institutions related to the subject of the study. In general we discovered that it is important to trust the informants' capacity to narrate.

Ethical issues

Standard ethical considerations are particularly prominent in biographical research, especially when informed consent and confidentiality are concerned. The dynamics of the interview situation often pulls the narrator into revealing more than they expected to say at first, which creates disputes about the value and meaning of the informed consent originally given by the respondent. This relates to the techniques used to analyse narratives, which aim to pick up on clues given by the interviewee in order to arrive at abductions about their motives, circumstances and experiences. These techniques are often more revealing than the informants realise, so it is always debatable how specific a researcher needs to be when informing a potential interviewee of the aims, methods and techniques applied in a study.

The issue of confidentiality is also a central one in biographical research, as almost each life story discloses substantial information about people who have been important to the narrator and who share the same stories, but they have not been asked for consent for those stories to be investigated. This gives rise to another ethical debate: who owns a story? The person who tells it, the person who has experienced it, the research team that has recorded and analysed it, or the scientific community as a whole? We tried to strike a balance between these considerations by masking names, facts and fragments that could reveal the identity of a narrator or other individuals involved in the story, but this was not always possible, especially if the

interviewee or a significant other was a prominent figure whose visibility was based on unique and therefore recognisable conditions and features. An important task we had was to edit the transcripts to conceal the identity of those involved in a story, without losing any information, but also protecting their anonymity against any future use of the data.

It is very important to help the respondent understand the function of the interview, as well as the relationship with the researcher and what would come out of it, because misunderstandings are very likely. For example, an informant who enjoyed the interview, and a researcher's kindness, came to think she had a new friend to phone and go out with, and felt offended when faced with the reality of the professional nature of the relationship with the interviewer. Another misunderstanding we came across was when interviewees vested researchers with an exaggerated power to solve their problems by conveying messages to policymakers and the public at large. Therefore we had to be clear about the limits of the impact we expected our study to have.

Concluding remarks

The analytical approaches presented before share common features. They comply with the nature of individual biography and its embeddedness in processes and trends across European societies. On the other hand, they represent distinctive ontological angles, specific foci and analytical steps. The application of a variety of analytical procedures allowed an insight into the multidimensional aspects of individual biographies and enriched the understanding of the social processes taking place in the European context. The outcomes of the Euroidentities project, presented and discussed in this book, indicate that autobiographical narratives are rich material which allow insight into complex and dynamic relations between the individual and the social world. They also provide an opportunity for the application of a variety of analytical tools as well as academic perspectives that complement each other. The idea of methodological openness, which guaranteed successful cooperation among the Euroidentities research team, allowed us to assure high research standards as well as to attempt to expand knowledge and the application of autobiographical narrative methodology in future research.

Moreover, it is important to note that the biographical method has revealed its power in giving great importance to the narrator, who is considered not only as the actor of his/her life story but also as the author of his/her narration, assuming the perspective of an agent-self both in shaping his/her life and his/her narrative. Indeed, during the analytical process we took into account not only what the narrators were recapitulating (what situations, experiences, characters and feelings they recollected), but also the way they reported them (the formal features of their biographical experiences – their

modes of narration, as well as their ways of argumentation), recognising the potentially unlimited freedom of producing one's own biographical narrative, albeit within given institutional and societal conditions. Indeed to grasp the mutual influences of human conduct and structural circumstances is one of the main challenges when analysing a biography. This is why the biographical approach as a whole is considered a useful way to solve the traditional opposition between the actor and the society, as in the case of other theoretical perspectives such as Giddens' structuration theory (1991) and Archer's morphogenetic approach (2007). Ultimately, it is due to the interviewees' capacity to narrate their transnational experiences that it was possible to see from a non-conventional (non-institutional, not top-down) point of view the phenomena Europeanising the mentality of many Europeans, in various spheres of social life.