AN INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
FOURTH EDITION
SAGE
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politicians whom Schütze originally interviewed with this method probably had
different reasons for and better skills at concealing awkward relations than other
potential interviewees. In the latter case, using this kind of strategy for eliciting bio-
graphical details also raises questions of research ethics.

A more practical problem is the sheer amount of textual material in the tran-
scripts of narrative interviews. Additionally, these are less obviously structured (by
topical areas, by the interviewer's questions) than semi-structured interviews. At the
very least, it is more difficult to recognize their structure. The sheer mass of unstruc-
tured texts produces problems in interpreting them. The consequence is often that
only a few but extremely voluminous case studies result from applying this method.
Therefore, before choosing this method you should decide beforehand whether it
is really the course (of a life, a patient's career, a professional career) that is central
to your research question. If it is not, the purposive topical steering allowed by a
semi-structured interview may be the more effective way to achieve the desired
data and findings.

Critical discussions provoked by this method have clarified the limits of narra-
tives as a data source. These limits may be based on the issue of the interview in
each case: "It is always only 'the story of that can be narrated, not a state or an
always recurring routine" (Hermanns 1995, p. 183). In the face of these limits of
narratives it should be settled, before applying this method, whether narratives are
appropriate as the only approach to the research question and the potential inter-
viewees, and whether and with which other sorts of data they should be combined.

The Episodic Interview

The starting point for the episodic interview (Flick 2000a, 2007b, Ch. 5) is the
assumption that subjects' experiences of a certain domain are stored and remem-
bered in forms of narrative-episodic and semantic knowledge. Whereas episodic
knowledge is organized closer to experiences and linked to concrete situations and
circumstances, semantic knowledge is based on assumptions and relations, which
are abstracted from these and generalized. For the former, the course of the situa-
tion in its context is the main unit around which knowledge is organized. In the
latter, concepts and their relation to each other are the central units (Figure 14.1).

To access both forms of knowledge about a domain, I have designed a method
to collect and analyze narrative-episodic knowledge using narratives, while semantic
knowledge is made accessible by concrete pointed questions. However, it is not
so much a time-saving, pragmatic jumping between the data types "narrative" and
"answer" which is intended, but rather the systematic link between forms of knowl-
edge that both types of data can make accessible.

The episodic interview yields context-related presentations in the form of a nar-
rative, because these are closer to experiences and their generative context than
other presentational forms. They make the processes of constructing realities more readily accessible than approaches which aim at abstract concepts and answers in a strict sense. But the episodic interview is not an attempt to artificially stylize experiences as a "narrate-able whole." Rather it starts from episodic-situational forms of experiential knowledge. Special attention is paid in the interview to situations or episodes in which the interviewee has had experiences that seem to be relevant to the question of the study. Both the form of the presentation (description or narrative) of the situation and the selection of other situations can be chosen by the interviewee according to aspects of subjective relevance.

In several domains, the episodic interview facilitates the presentation of experiences in a general, comparative form and at the same time it ensures that those situations and episodes are told in their specificity. Therefore, it includes a combination of narratives oriented to situational or episodic contexts and argumentation that peel off such contexts in favor of conceptual and rule-oriented knowledge. The interviewee's narrative competence is used without relying on zugzwangs and without forcing the interviewee to finish a narrative against his or her intentions.

**What Are the Elements of the Episodic Interview?**
The central element of this form of interview is that you recurrently ask the interviewee to present narratives of situations (e.g., "If you look back, what was your first encounter with television? Could you please recount that situation for me?"). Also, you can mention chains of situations ("Please could you recount how your day yesterday went off, and where and when technology played a part in it?").
You will prepare an interview guide in order to orient the interview to the topical
domains for which such a narrative is required. In order to familiarize the interviewee
with this form of interview its basic principle is first explained (e.g., "In this interview,
I will ask you repeatedly to recount situations in which you have had certain experi-
ences with technology in general or with specific technologies").

A further aspect is the interviewee’s imaginations of expected or feared changes
("Which developments do you expect in the area of computers in the near future?
Please imagine and tell me about a situation which would make this evolution clear
for me!"). Such narrative incentives are complemented by questions in which you
ask for the interviewees subjective definitions ("What do you link to the word
‘television’ today?"). Also, you will ask for abstractive relations ("In your opinion,
who should be responsible for change due to technology, who is able to or should
take the responsibility?"). This is the second large complex of questions aimed at
accessing semantic parts of everyday knowledge.

Case Study 14.3  Technological Change in Everyday Life

In a comparative study, I conducted 27 episodic interviews on the perception and evaluation
of technological change in everyday life. In order to be able to analyze different perspec-
tives on this issue, I interviewed information engineers, social scientists, and
teachers as members of professions dealing with technology in different degrees (as
developers of technology, as professional and everyday users of technology). The
interview mentioned the following topical fields.

The interviewees’ “technology biographies” (the first encounter with technology they
remember, their most important experiences linked to technology) were one point of
reference. The interviewees’ technological everyday life (how yesterday went off with
regard to where and when technology played a part in it; domains of everyday life like
work, leisure, household, and technology) was the second.

As a response to the narrative incentive “If you can recall, what was your first
encounter with technology? Could you please recount that situation?”, the following
situation was recounted, for example;

I was a girl, I am a girl, let’s say, but I was always interested in technology, I
have to say, or and, well I was given puppets as usual. And then sometime,
my big dream, a train set, and uh yeah that train. I wound it up and put it on
the back of my sister’s head, and then the little wheels turned. And the hair
got caught up in the train wheels. And then it was over with the technology,
because then my sister had to go to the hairdresser. The train had to be taken
to pieces, it was most complicated, she had no more hair on her head,
everybody said, “Oh how awful,” I cried because my train was taken to pieces.
That was already the end of the technology. Of course, I did not know at all
what had happened, I did not realize at all what would happen. I don’t know
what drove me, why I had the devil in me. She was sitting around and I
thought, “put the train on her head.” How long I actually played with the train
before, don't really know. Probably not very long, and it was a great train. Yeah, then it was over for a while. That was an experience, not a very positive experience.

Another example is the following situation, which is remembered as a first encounter with technology:

Yes, electric lights on the Christmas tree. I knew that already from that time, yeah and that has impressed me deeply. I saw those candles at other children's houses and actually, nowadays would say that this is much more romantic, much more beautiful. But at that time, of course, it was impressive, if I turned on a candle, all the lights went off, yes, and when I wanted. And that was just the case on the first Christmas holiday, it's a holiday, the parents sleep longer. And the children, of course, are finished with sleeping very early. They go out to the Christmas tree to continue playing with the gifts, which had had to be stopped on Christmas Eve. And I could then turn on the candles again and everything shone again, and with wax candles, this was not the case.

A large part of the interview focused on the use of various exemplary technologies which determine changes in everyday life in an extraordinary way (computer, television). For these examples, definitions and experiences were mentioned. As a response to the question "What do you link to the word ‘computer’ today?", a female information engineer gave the following definition:

Computer, of course I must have an absolutely exact conception of that …. Computer, well, uh, must have a processor, must have a memory, can be reduced to a Turing machine. These are very technical details. That means a computer can't do anything except go left, go right and write on a tape, that is a model of the computer. And I don't link more to it at all at first. This means, for me, a computer is a completely dull machine.

Consequences of technological change in different areas (e.g., family life, children's life, etc.) were focused across the different technologies. In each of these areas, narrative incentives were complemented by conceptual-argumentative questions (Box 14.2). A context protocol was written for every interview. The interviews showed the common aspects of the different views, so that in the end an everyday theory of technological change could be formulated across all cases. They also showed group-specific differences in the views, so that every group-specific accentuation of this everyday theory could be documented.

In this example, you can see how the episodic interview is applied to study a social psychological issue. Here, narratives of specific situations are given and concepts and definitions are mentioned.
Box 14.2 Example Questions from the Episodic Interview

- What does "technology" mean for you? What do you associate with the word "technology"?
- When you look back, what was your first experience with technology? Could you please tell me about this situation?
- If you look at your household, what part does technology play in it, and what has changed in it? Please tell me a situation typical for that.
- On which occasion did you first have contact with a computer? Could you please tell me about that situation?
- Have your relations with other people changed due to technologies? Please tell me a typical situation.
- Please recount how your day yesterday went off and when technologies played a part in it.
- Which parts of your life are free of technology? Please tell me about a typical situation.
- What would life without technology look like for you? Please tell me about a situation of this type, or a typical day.
- If you consider the life of (your) children today and compare it with your life as a child, what is the part played by technology in each case? Please tell me about a situation typical for that which makes this clear for you and me.
- What do you link to the word "television" today? Which device is relevant for that?
- What part does TV play in your life today? Please tell me about a typical situation.
- What determines if and when you watch TV? Please tell me a situation typical for that.
- If you look back, what was your first encounter with TV? Please tell me about that situation.
- On which occasion did TV play its most important role in your life? Please tell me about that situation.
- Are there areas in your life in which you feel fear when technology enters? Please tell me about a situation typical for that.
- What gives you the impression that a certain technology or a device is outdated? Please tell me about a typical situation.

What Are the Problems in Conducting the interview?

The general problem of interviews generating narratives—that some people have greater problems with narrating than others—is also the case here. But it is qualified here, because you will not request a single overall narrative—as in the narrative interview—but rather stimulate several delimited narratives. The problem of how to mediate the principle of recounting certain situations to the interviewee has to be handled carefully in order to prevent situations (in which certain experiences have been made) from being mentioned but not recounted.
As in other forms of interviews, it is an essential precondition that you as the interviewer have really internalized the principle of the interview. Therefore, I suggest careful interview training using concrete examples here as well. This should focus on how to handle the interview guide and, above all, how to stimulate narratives and—where necessary—how to probe.

What Is the Contribution to the General Methodological Discussion?
In episodic interviews, you try to employ the advantages of both the narrative interview and the semi-structured interview. These interviews use the interviewee's competence to present experiences in their course and context as narratives. Episodes as an object of such narratives and as an approach to the experiences relevant for the subject under study allow a more concrete approach than does the narrative of the life history. In contrast to the narrative interview, routines and normal everyday phenomena are analyzed with this procedure. For a topic like technological change, these routines may be as instructive as the particulars of the interviewee's history with technology.

In the episodic interview, the range of experiences is not confined to those parts that can be presented in a narrative. As the interviewer you have more options to intervene and direct it through a series of key questions concerning a subject recounting and defining situations. Thus, the extremely one-sided and artificial situation given in the narrative interview here is replaced by a more open dialogue in which narratives are used as only one form of data. By linking narratives and question-answer sequences, this method realizes the triangulation of different approaches as the basis of data collection.

How Does the Method Fit into the Research Process?
The theoretical background of studies using the episodic interview is the social construction of reality during the presentation of experiences. The method was developed as an approach to social representations. Therefore, research questions have mainly up to now focused on group-specific differences in experiences and everyday knowledge. The comparison between certain groups is the goal of sampling cases (see Chapter 11). The connection between a linear and a circular understanding of the research process underlies its application. The data from episodic interviews should be analyzed with the methods of thematic and theoretic coding (see Chapter 23).

Limitations of the Method.
Apart from the problems already mentioned in conducting episodic interviews, their application is limited to the analysis of everyday knowledge of certain objects and topics and interviewees' own history with them. As with other interviews, they give access neither to activities nor to interactions. However, these can be reconstructed from the participants' viewpoints and group-specific differences in such experiences may be clarified.
Narratives between Biography and Episode

Interviews primarily aiming at interviewees' narratives collect data in the form of a more or less comprehensive and structured whole—as a narrative of life histories or of concrete situations in which interviewees have had certain experiences. Thus, these interviews are more sensitive and responsive to interviewees' viewpoints than other interviews in which concrete topics and the way these should be treated are pre-structured very much by the questions that are asked. Procedures generating narratives, however, are also based on interviewers' inputs and ways of structuring the situation of collecting data. Which form of narrative you should prefer as a source of data—the comprehensive biographical narrative in the narrative interview or the narrative of details that are linked to situations in the episodic interview—should be decided with regard to the research question and the issue under study. Such decisions should not be made on the basis of the fundamentally postulated strength of one method compared to all other methods of collecting data, as the programmatic discussions around the narrative interview sometimes suggest. An alternative to creating a myth about narratives in such a programmatic way is to reintroduce a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee in the episodic interview. A second alternative is to stimulate this dialogue among the members of a family in joint narratives of family histories. These will be discussed in the second part of the next chapter.

KEY POINTS

- Narratives can be used in interviews to elicit a more comprehensive and contextualized account of events and experiences.
- This can be achieved with either overall life histories—biographical narratives—or situation-oriented narratives.
- There are different ways of conceiving narratives in interviews—either as the main form, standing alone, or embedded in different forms of questions.
- Not everything can be an issue for a narrative presentation. Sometimes other forms of accessing experiences are needed to complement, or even replace, narratives.

Exercise 14.1

[Exercise content not visible]
Further Reading

The Narrative Interview

The first two texts deal with the topic of biographical research, whereas the third introduces the method in English:


The Episodic Interview

In these texts, some applications and the methodological background of the episodic interview can be found:


Narratives between Biography and Episode

To enter into a discussion of these questions more deeply, these two works of Bruner are very instructive:


Notes

1 Sometimes also in semi-structured interviews, narratives are integrated as an element (e.g., in the problem-centered interview). In case of doubt, if they are unproductive, they are subordinated to the interview guide. More generally, Mishler (1986, p. 235) has studied what happens when interviewees in the semi-structured interview start to narrate, how these narratives are treated, and how they are suppressed rather than taken up.

2 Whyl is a place in Germany where a nuclear power plant was planned and built and where big ana-nuclear demonstrations took place in the 1970s, with lots of people camping on the site of the planned plant. M/L was a quite influential Marxist-Leninist political group at that time, which was not supporting this kind of demonstration.