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Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Research- Elicited Data for Longitudinal Analysis. The Case of Oral History Data on World War II Forced Labourers

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Abstract: »Die Gewinnung und Interpretation von Daten aus der qualitativen Forschung als Grundlage von Längsschnittanalysen. Zur historischen Dimension narrativer Interviews mit ehemaligen NS-Zwangsarbeitern«. Since a number of disciplines have developed methodological and interpretive approaches towards Oral History, the dialogue between History and Sociology about the possible use of life story interviews for longitudinal analysis has been under pressure from a variety of influences in a rapidly evolving discursive field. While psychology and brain research have thrown the scientific substance of narrative interviews as such into doubt, media and museums assign strictly defined roles to interview materials to serve their representative needs. At the same time, paradigm shifts and terminological trends within social and cultural sciences further narrow the room for manoeuvre for Oral History as far as opening up of a perspective on individual handling of past events within a biography is concerned. Drawing on experiences of an interview project with World War II forced labourers, the article explores what contribution Oral History can still make to a qualitative dimension of longitudinal analysis.

Keywords: Longitudinal Analysis, Oral History, qualitative interviews, Archiving, secondary analysis, Data Access, Cultural Memory.

1. Introduction

Biographical research has taken a pretty contradictory road over recent years from historians' perspective. While data collection is still widely and increasingly conducted by sociologists and historians, especially with regard to the recent political and societal transformations in Eastern Europe, its interpretation has been claimed increasingly by psychology and brain research, whereas the distribution of scientific findings gets more and more under the influence of media and museums. On the other hand, there have been terminological paradigm shifts recently, as well, that have to be taken into consideration. Although it is still mostly individual respondents who are interviewed for historical re-

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search projects, the main perspectives from which they are evaluated are rather the evolution of cultures of commemoration, manifestations of collective memory and the (re)construction of generations. What is more, within the historical sciences themselves Oral History has come to be seen as a commonly used method, however, in terms of an area of research within its own right – namely as “Erfahrungsgeschichte” (a term coined by Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, with the former describing it as untranslatable, or at best, to be circumscribed in English as “the empirical reconnection of our patterns of perception and action to our respective collective and individual experiences. First, they have to be perceived from a distance, evaluated and then either be accepted or discarded,” (Niethammer/Leh 2007: 1, author’s translation) – its place within the field of study has never actually stopped to remain controversial.

Drawing on experiences gained mostly from a huge Oral History undertaking – the International Forced Labourers Documentation Project (IFLDP) which gathered together ca. 600 life story interviews with people across Europe and beyond who had been used as forced labourers by Germany during World War II – I will try to explore current issues of data collection and interpretation raised among qualitative researchers against the scientific background outlined above.

2. Data Collection and Evaluation – Experiences from an International Research Project

There are good reasons for strict rules for the creation of research samples. The so-called “theoretical sampling” (Strauss/Corbin 1996) is a reliable approach in this respect, further elaborated by the idea of “theoretical saturation” (Hermanns 1992, both quoted from Küsters 2006) which can – according to the respective author and depending on cognitive interest – be reached within a range of twelve to forty interviews. As ambitious and sincere the idea behind it might be – to take as many cases into consideration which are needed to represent any theoretical concept that is deemed relevant for an appropriate image of the described part of reality (Hermanns 1992: 116) – one could impossibly theoretically determine the arrival of the saturation point as Niethammer has argued: “It depends on the complexity of the facts of the case, the distance from the subject matter etc. and should be measured according to experience or convention.” (Niethammer 1985: 399, author’s translation). However, the process should also be regarded from the other side, i.e. what theoretical concepts the data themselves might bring up which the researcher hadn’t reckoned with beforehand. Niethammer calls this “Enttypisierungsschock”, another of his untranslatable terms (Niethammer 1985: 410), which indicates the necessity to change hypotheses and possibly the course of the entire study if need be. This

can even undermine the interviewer's understanding of this particular or, indeed, any research process in general during the course of a research project.

Apart from the general approach to sampling, there has been change going on as regards the constellation of interviews. As one-on-one interviews had been the rule for decades and the presence of further persons, be it from the interviewer's or the interviewee's side, been seen mostly only as a potential interference, this has now turned towards a targeted interest for communicative processes within families and their influence on the individual construction of memories. Although this connection had been established by Halbwachs as early as the mid-1920s (Halbwachs 1966, first published in 1925), it has seen a renaissance at least within Germany as far as research based on narrative interviews is concerned. It was mainly brought about by the project "Tradierung von Geschichtsbewusstsein [Passing on of historical consciousness]" conducted by Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall between 1997 and 2000. This will probably have a sustainable impact on the potential size and scope of future interview-based studies, however, cannot be discussed in detail here and now. Instead I will turn to aspects of the actual research process.

Nina Baur (Baur 2004: 25) has recently raised the issue of the limits of quantitative longitudinal analysis, identifying four main aspects: generation of hypotheses, change of the basic population, production and selection bias, and data collection respectively data editing. I will comment on these four points, assessing from a historian's perspective the potential contribution of qualitative longitudinal analyses as represented by the evaluation of life story interviews. The claim itself might already be seen as controversial, given the scepticism among researchers as far as the factual connection to the past within biographical narrations is concerned which is a prerequisite if one aims for a longitudinal section. If individual memories were only determined by their bearer's present needs, his or her interpretive patterns and the dynamics of the interview setting and interaction, it would neglect that biographical representations tend to take up shape which shows striking constancy over time. As the perspective of the narrator changes over time, there has to be a strong and reliable external support for the individual to keep up this degree of constancy over years or even decades. Therefore, the relatedness to an actual past – though mediated through later experiences and reflections – remains a valid point of departure. With Lutz Niethammer one could say that the claim of a reference of interviews to the past is a balancing act between the poles of positivist simplicity and constructivist scepticism towards Oral History interviews that guides us how to use the space in-between these poles for hermeneutic interpretation (Niethammer 2007: 62).

The hypothesising process in the IFLDP was mainly informed by the historical point of reference of the interviews, i.e. the experience of forced labour for Germany during World War II, by formerly conducted biographical re-

search projects and by the immediate social and political concomitants of our own study. From there, we came up with two main ideas, the first being that respondents probably present a more favourable view on Germany and the Germans than they would have done ten or fifty years ago, with the reasons for this being the different stage of life they have reached plus the recent compensation process which for the first time officially acknowledged forced labourers as Nazi victims and brought some material benefits for roughly two thirds of survivors. The second hypothesis – also mainly a result of the eventual societal recognition – was that having been a former forced labourer would play an important role in the narrative creation of the biography, at least in the current situation. While both generally hold true, there were, nevertheless, notable exceptions and qualifications needed which can mostly be derived from the personal background and/or socio-political living conditions of the interviewee which only shows the necessity for a context-sensitive approach to hypothesising in the first place.

Production and selection bias result mostly from political claims, varying research interests, and funding, all of which is usually at least attempted to be balanced by scientific monitoring. Researchers are hardly ever in a position to determine the scope and composition of their samples completely autonomously. Writing successful proposals as the initial step might already depend on targeting groups where research is determined as necessary by scientific foundations who could act as financiers. If the potential financier represents political interests, it creates even more of an impact as in this case there is a manifest outside reference for the scientific endeavour which will be recognised by many potential interviewees and, therefore, the scientist has to take up position somewhere along the lines of affirmation and delimitation. If the scope of a study is extended either on a interdisciplinary or even international level, coherence and homogeneity are no longer matters of course. Instead, specific influences of the kind outlined above are likely to be multiplied as all contributors are somehow bound to their particular conditions of acting. And while the general framework of a research project is being agreed to, the exact understanding of its goals and implementation of its methods of data collection and evaluation are most probably adapted to local requirements and interests. All of these influences play a role when it comes to determining how big samples will be and how they are composed. It does not rule out comparability as such, but puts constraints on the scope and possible significance of potential comparative approaches.

These aspects would probably be seen only as minor interferences were it not for the idea of representativity somehow hovering over all biographical research endeavours, with the so-called “basic population” of persons concerned by the phenomenon in question being its point of reference. For the IFLDP, in this regard we could draw on estimations which had been established by scholars scientifically contributing or reacting to the most recent

process of compensation of Nazi victims which for the first time explicitly included forced labourers. Nevertheless, figures – believed to be in a region between twelve and fourteen million people over the entire time span of World War II (Spoerer 2001: 223) – have stayed controversial ever since. Controversy mostly resulted from questions like: under which circumstances should Prisoners of War be regarded as forced labourers, and, were all camp and ghetto inmates automatically forced labourers, or, can somebody who took up a job without immediate physical force still turn into a forced labourer once he is not allowed to leave his workplace anymore, let alone terminate his contract? Depending on what answers are given to these questions the “basic population” would immediately change by several hundred thousands of people. This should be kept in mind when one tries to draw practical consequences from Baur’s emphasis of the importance of the selection of interviewees for the validity of results (Baur 2003: 14f.).

Data collection and editing, as far as international projects are concerned, should aim for uniformity of provided data as their ultimate goal. Of course there are more criteria that should be fulfilled, however, for subsequent evaluation, coherence of the data base seems to be of utmost importance. While an identical approach from all contributors is definitely a pipe dream, variations should be explicated and, at best, be explained as to why their pursuit is more relevant than stick to the common project design and how comparability can still be safeguarded. While with narrowing size of a sample, the attempt to represent as many extraordinary cases as possible to somehow explore the range of field of study is understandable, but there exists the danger to create a cabinet of curiosities instead of a theoretically saturated sample.

Küsters (Küsters 2006: 187ff.) has raised some sketchy thoughts on international projects which deserve more thorough investigation. Basically, she raises two important questions, firstly what influence translations have on interpretation of research data and secondly how culturally specific our understanding of a narrative interview is within Western Europe or, at least, compared to other continents. Language has undoubtedly been a hindrance as translations cost a lot of money and can still sometimes provide only moderate results in the face of the multiple abilities translators must have and the requirements necessary for the process. If translation is needed, it might be more controllable to use an interpreter with whom it would be possible to clear up incidents of controversial understanding of narrations or conflicting estimations of situations during an interview. In such a setting the researcher would at least have immediate access to both the interviewee and the interpreter, a lot of questions have to be dealt with on the spot although they could probably be solved more thoroughly following some reflection after the interview. Furthermore, if the researcher is somehow basically familiar with the interview language, it is important to consult the transcription of the interview to establish the origin of ambiguous elements of the translation and to try to get access to the actual wording, regis-

ter etc. of the respondent. All these recommendations mean a lot of extra work, however, the amount of content and meaning lost through translation is potentially so high that all possible amendments should be made.

3. Prerogative of Interpretation – Psychology vs. History

Of course, the alternative outlined above is less of an either-or-question, but rather one to assess the actual lines of interaction and an attempt to measure the anatomy of both sides' mutual dependence. The point of departure in this respect is the connection between narration and historical past. Sociologists generally claim a direct reference between what people tell them in research interviews and the aspect of reality they want to research into. Oral historians, although not insisting on the possibility of an immediate access of interviewees to their past experience, would still argue that interviews show at least how individuals have dealt with certain aspects of their past personal or social reality, thereby keeping up the idea of a mediated access to past realities. Psychologists, on the other hand – backed up by new insights from brain researchers – have recently flatly discarded this connection altogether (Welzer 2000) and instead stated that oral history interviews tell us mainly something about the persons involved in the interview process and about their socio-psychological interaction (Jensen/Welzer 2003). This view was countered from the historians' side recently: "However, the experiences of numerous Oral History studies suggest to proceed on the assumption, that despite all displacement caused by memorising and mental conditions of selection, a trace of a past reality can already be read out of the narrations of contemporary witnesses at the moment of perception." (Dejung 2008: 102, author's translation). If one accepts this empirical finding, there is still the undeniable problem of the unreliability of even the most vividly told memories. Within the interview situation, there exists the possibility to ask the interviewee to go into greater detail with some allegedly questionable story, claiming specific interest of the researcher which usually does not raise any suspicion. Apart from that there is no definite means to establish the „truth“ of certain memories other than to link them with evidence from other interviews or other biographical or institutional sources. Ultimately, even if the ontological status of some statement cannot be established with certainty, its function within the biography or within the creation of the narrative still opens up interpretive potential worth following up which is a more appropriate perspective for qualitative research on the whole (Niethammer 2007: 61).

While oral historians would most probably agree that autobiographical memories could impossibly be understood if detached from their context of origin, this is still some way short of claiming that life is narrated and lived against the backdrop of fictional stories. (Tschuggnall 2003: 150f.). It could be argued more precisely that a strict separation between what was real and what

would have been possible in a given course of events in the past is ultimately delusive as the interfaces of both aspects are subsequently arranged within a supra-individual historical picture whose interfaces lie beyond the personal dimension (Geulen 2000: 120). Therefore, the historical topic of the interview, which usually lies in the past, nevertheless provides the common interpretive horizon for both interviewer and interviewee. This is the line of orientation which keeps the conversation going and creates the assumption of understanding between the participants. If one of them departs from this common basis, this creates the need for legitimization.

All propositions of psychologists seem to be centred around a specific understanding of how and why individuals remember. This understanding is based on a number of assumptions. It is stated that interviewees want to present their life story as coherent, their relationship with the social surrounding should appear harmonious and their narration should be homogeneous on the whole and compatible with a generally accepted course of historical events. However, this assumption of striving for harmony and congruence among interviewees does not necessarily occur more often than its direct opposite, a desire to diverge from social expectations – be it from family members, the interviewer or an imagined abstract public – and be incompatible and idiosyncratic instead. It could be argued that even this trait of thought still follows the same general “matrix of harmony”, if only in a negative way. However, it shows at the same time that the room for manoeuvre of individual interviewees is actually a lot bigger than scholars recently have admitted.

4. Oral History vs. Collective Memory – Do Individuals have a Voice?

Where do things said above leave the individual and his or her memories in theoretical perspective? Sociological assuredness about the interactivity of interviews seems to have been self-evident from its very beginning. Oral historians were somewhat shifting, with some readily accepting the impact of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee on the eventual outcome (Niethammer 1985: 396), while others were still harbouring the belief in the autonomy of the narrator. How strong the impact of interactivity has to be estimated is epitomised in the empirical judgement that “there is no second chance for a first impression” from each participant of the interview (Daniela Koleva), meaning the immediate encounter between interviewer and interviewee already has far-reaching implications for the further course of their interaction within the interview. So, as this constellation is undeniable in the first place, it would be far-fetched to reduce all references to past events which are the ostensible content of any interview to a mere function of psycho-social interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Of course, both are interested parties, so there is no such thing as a neutral listener, however, they still have a

third outward reference which goes beyond the dynamics of their personal relationship. The narrative interview still provides an example case of how meaning is endowed within a historical-autobiographical framework and how a life story is presented within its own right (Wierling 2000: 37).

Terminological developments within social and, even more so, within cultural sciences have seen a shift from the emancipatory approach to make individual actors visible in historical contexts towards a generalising diagnosis of societal developments which take more of an interest in the relevance of the past for the present than to explore what role this past played in the actual lives of individual people concerned, mostly as victims of specific historic events or developments. So, in a way, the scientific boom of the individual actor has been displaced by the political boom of various victim groups who compete for societal recognition. This holds also true for the recently “re-discovered” group of former forced labourers of Nazi Germany (Niethammer 2007a: 84). Individual memories have been “collectivised” with the consequence that single persons are no longer seen as carriers of unique memories, but rather as mere peculiarities of collective patterns of remembrance.

There are mainly three concepts that prevail in this respect. Whereas the idea of cultures of commemoration operates along the duality of official vs. private memories or rather of hegemonial vs. peripheral ones, thereby rather investigating the “politics of memory”, the idea of a collective memory, on the other hand, strives to identify sediments of memories which still bear relevance for a given society’s present or which have simply turned out to be dominant points of reference to represent past events today, thereby evoking an almost archaeological image of various layers of a past which are sedimented and can be taken as certainties. Thirdly, it has become fashionable to view at least contemporary history in terms of generations which have shaped the scope of perception and action of entire age-groups. Again, this has led to an emphasis on collective predispositions to provide orientation for individuals. There is nothing wrong with this as such. It just propels an underlying propensity among scholars that they already know everything which they ostensibly want to find out during the interview. Therefore, as a result, all three paradigms work together to eclipse the dynamics and significance of individual memories.

5. Public Distribution and Application of Findings from Oral History Interviews

Increased interest of mostly visual media has seen a rising demand for contemporary witnesses as they provide an “aura of authenticity” that media lack quasi per definition. However, far from being a blessing for the individuals in demand, the biographies are often not presented in a way that does justice to those who individually expose themselves, but they are rather turned into tools for argumentative or discursive strategies of those who use their life stories for

documentaries and feature films. Partly this can be explained by the different perspectives that an individual has on his or her biography compared to how researchers look at it and in which new context they transfer it. However, the impact goes beyond methodological requirements. "Contemporary witnesses present us a past that has been overcome, rendered harmless, and thus become easily consumable. [...] Individual memory levelled and cut into stencils by the norms of the culture of commemoration, so that the contemporary witness let appear as "authentic" what is actually only "fitting";" as Martin Sabrow has recently remarked (Wehrs 2006: 1, author's translation). One has to keep in mind, though, that the process of "cutting stencils" mostly happens within the chain of utilizations rather than within the individual reconstruction of memories. Another influence has immediately to do with technical production of blurred genres like the connection of historical documentaries with entertainment. Such programmes, according to Wulf Kansteiner, "assign contemporary witnesses ... a merely serving function, ... to prove ... with short scraps of sentences, whatever statement and evaluations is set by commentary and pictures." (Wehrs 2006: 2, author's translation) Due to their greater resources regarding available space to allocate to interview materials, a different approach can be seen when it comes to the use of oral history in museums and exhibitions. There, oral history has rather attained the status as a means to introduce scientific findings to the broader public. One can find more and more exhibitions and presentations recently which explicitly apply a biographic approach to their topic, using one or several individuals' life stories as an "anchor", thereby giving a lot more space and attention to biographical research than media and scholars usually do.

6. Relevance of Oral History as a Method

The so-called documentary method seems to offer a way out (Bohnsack et al 2006: 40f.) of the dilemma to somehow balance the prevailing influence psychology and psychoanalytic terminology have enjoyed within interpretive research processes over recent years. Baur (2007: 216) has recently pointed out two main advantages of the documentary method as opposed to other evaluation procedures of narrative interviews, namely being systematically comparative and aiming towards multidimensional interpretations of social phenomena. Should research results be somehow generalisable, then a comparative approach is indispensable throughout collection and evaluation of data. At the same time, the need to contextualise findings from individual respondents tends to result in creating simple causalities which mostly only serve to legitimise common sense presumptions, brought into the research project as working hypotheses. Here, a multidimensional approach can help to avoid self-affirming conclusions and, on the other hand, help to differentiate cognitive interests during evaluation. Examples like this give us a clearer understanding and an

idea how to practically implement Baur's (2007: 220) postulate about the inseparability of data collection and evaluation in research practice.

As far as longitudinal analysis is concerned, oral history – despite substantial objections from within the scientific community – should still be able to provide several vital elements:

- 1) It offers broad potential for hypothesising as it opens up the entire temporal horizon from mediated reference to events of the past until their repercussions in the present.
- 2) Within interviews one can trace the change of attitudes towards the past as it has occurred over time within the course of life of the interviewees, thereby offering a layered longitudinal section.
- 3) Through the interview process we are enabled to see if and how exactly the past becomes operative in the present of an individual's life within society, again opening up insights into developments over time.
- 4) By engaging in international comparison – as liable to flaws in a strictly scientific sense as it might appear at face value – it becomes possible to establish what was specific for a certain time and what was rather due to the particular circumstances of a certain society or state with regard to individual perceptions and working up of social processes in the past. Thereby, we can enhance our understanding of historical causality as it becomes clearer how individual conduct and broader circumstances interact on a concrete level.

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