

14 NARRATIVES

CONTENTS

The Narrative Interview 177
The Episodic Interview 185
Narratives between Biography and Episode 191

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- use narratives in qualitative research.
- identify the difference between life histories and episodes as a basis for narratives.
- distinguish the advantages and problems of various forms of narratives in interviews.

You can use narratives¹ produced by interviewees as a form of data as an alternative to semi-structured interviews. The basic skepticism about how far subjective experiences may be tapped in the question-answer scheme of traditional interviews, even if this is handled in a flexible way, is the methodological starting point for the propagation of using narratives. Narratives allow the researcher to approach the interviewee's experiential yet structured world in a comprehensive way. A narrative is characterized as follows:

First the initial situation is outlined ("how everything started"), then the events relevant to the narrative are selected from the whole host of experiences and presented as a coherent progression of events ("how things developed"), and finally the situation at the end of the development is presented ("what became"). (Hermanns 1995, p. 183)

As a special method for collecting this form of data, the narrative interview introduced by Schütze (see Riemann and Schütze 1987; Rosenthal 2004) is a particularly good example of this type of approach. With the attention it attracted (especially in the German-speaking areas) it has intensified the interest in qualitative methods as a whole. Narratives as a mode of knowledge and of presenting experiences are also increasingly analyzed in psychology (e.g., Bruner 1990, 1991; Flick 1996; Murray 2000; Sarbin 1986). Two methods which use narratives in this way are discussed in this chapter.

The Narrative Interview

The narrative interview is mainly used in the context of biographical research (for an overview see Bernaux 1981; Rosenthal 2004). The method was developed in the context of a project on local power structures and decision processes. Its basic principle of collecting data is described as follows:

In the narrative interview, the informant is asked to present the history of an area of interest, in which the interviewee participated, in an extempore narrative The interviewer's task is to make the informant tell the story of the area of interest in question as a consistent story of all relevant events from its beginning to its end. (Hermanns 1995, p. 183)

Elements of the Narrative Interview

The narrative interview is begun using a "generative narrative question" (Riemann and Schütze 1987, p. 353), which refers to the topic of the study and is intended to stimulate the interviewee's main narrative. The latter is followed by the stage of narrative probing in which narrative fragments that were not exhaustively detailed before are

completed. The last stage of the interview is the “balancing phase, in which the interviewee may also be asked questions that aim at theoretical accounts of what happened and at balancing the story, reducing the ‘meaning’ of the whole to its common denominator” (Hermanns 1995, p. 184). At this stage, the interviewees are taken as experts and theoreticians of themselves.

If you want to elicit a narrative which is relevant to your research question, you must formulate the generative narrative question broadly but at the same time sufficiently specifically for the interesting experiential domain to be taken up as a central theme. The interest may refer to the informant’s life history in general. In this case, the generative narrative question is rather unspecified, for example: “I would like to ask you to begin with your life history.” Or it may aim at a specific, temporal, and topical aspect of the informant’s biography, for example a phase of professional reorientation and its consequences. An example of such a generative question is shown in Box 14.1.

Box 14.1 Example of a Generative Narrative Question in the Narrative Interview

This is a typical example of a good generative narrative question:

I want to ask you to tell me how the story of your life occurred. The best way to do this would be for you to start from your birth, with the little child that you once were, and then tell all the things that happened one after the other until today. You can take your time in doing this, and also give details, because for me everything is of interest that is important for you.

Source: Hermanns (1995, p. 182)

It is important that you check whether the generative question really is a narrative question. Clear hints on the course of events told are given in the example by Hermanns in Box 14.1. These refer to several stages and include the explicit request for a narration and for detailing it.

If the interviewee begins a narrative after this question, it is crucial for the quality of the data in this narrative that the narration is not interrupted or obstructed by the interviewer. For example, you should not ask questions in this part (e.g., “Who is this about?”) or interrupt with directive interventions (e.g., “Could this problem not have been managed in a different way?”) or evaluations (“That was a good idea of yours!”). Instead, as interviewer, as an active listener, you should signal (e.g. by reinforcing “*hm’s*”) that you empathize with the narrated story and the perspective of the

narrator. Thus, you will support and encourage the interviewees to continue their narratives until the end.

The end of the story is indicated by a "coda," for instance "I think I've taken you through my whole life" (Riemann and Schütze 1987, p. 353) or "That's pretty well it by and large. I hope that has meant something to you" (Hermanns 1995, p. 184). In the next stage—the questioning period—the story's fragments that have not been further carried out are readdressed or the interviewer with another generative narrative question takes up those passages that had been unclear. For example, "You told me before how it came about that you moved from X to Y. I did not quite understand how your disease went on after that. Could you please tell me that part of the story in a little more detail?" In the balancing phase, more and more abstract questions are asked, which aim for description and argumentation. Here, it is suggested first to ask "how" questions and then only afterwards to complement them with "why" questions aiming at explanations.

A main criterion for the validity of the information is whether the interviewee's account is primarily a narrative. Although to some extent descriptions of situations and routines or argumentation may be incorporated in order to explain reasons or goals, the dominant form of presentation should be a narrative of the course of events (if possible from the beginning to the end) and of developmental processes. This distinction is clarified by Hermanns (1995, p. 184) who uses the following example:

My attitude towards nuclear plants cannot be narrated, but I could tell the story about how my present attitude came about. "Well, I walked, it must have been 1972, across the site at Wyl, all those huts there and I thought, well that is great, what these people have got going here, but with their concern about nuclear energy they are kind of mad. I was strongly M/L at that time."²

That this method works and the main narrative provides a richer version of the events and experiences than the other forms of presentation that are argued as consequences is one main reason that the narrators become entangled in certain constraints ("threefold narrative *zugzwangs*"). This entangling will start as soon as they have got involved in the situation of the narrative interview and started the narrative. The constraints are the *constraint of closing gestalt*, the *constraint of condensing*, and the *constraint of detailing*. The first makes narrators bring to an end a narrative once they have started it. The second requires that only what is necessary for understanding the process in the story becomes part of the presentation. The story is condensed not only because of limited time but also so that the listener is able to understand and follow it. The narrative provides background details and relationships necessary for understanding the story due to the constraint of detailing. Through these narrative constraints, the narrator's control, which dominates in other forms of oral presentation, is minimized to such an extent that awkward topics and areas are also mentioned:

Narrators of unprepared extempore narratives of their own experiences are driven to talk also about events and action orientations, which they prefer to keep silent about in normal conversations and conventional interviews owing to their awareness of guilt or shame or their entanglements of interests. (Schütze 1976, p. 225)

Thus, there was the creation of a technique for eliciting narratives of topically relevant stories. This technique provides data that you cannot produce in other forms of interviewing for three reasons. First, the narrative takes on some independence during its recounting. Second, “people ‘know’ and are able to present a lot more of their lives than they have integrated in their theories of themselves and of their lives. This knowledge is available to informants at the level of narrative presentation but not at the level of theories” (Hermanns 1995, p. 185). Finally, an analogous relationship between the narrative presentation and the narrated experience is assumed: “In the retrospective narrative of experiences, events in the life history (whether actions or natural phenomena) are reported on principle in the way they were experienced by the narrator as actor” (Schütze 1976, p. 197).

Case Study 14.1 Excerpt from a Narrative Interview

As an illustration, the following is taken from the beginning of a biographical main narrative of a mental patient (E) given to the interviewer (I). Gerd Riemann is one of the protagonists of biographical research with narrative interviews. This example comes from a typical study of biographies using the narrative interview (Riemann 1987, pp. 66–68). While reading it, look for when the interviewee comes to the topic of the interview (mental illness). References to villages and areas are replaced by general words in double brackets ((...)). Words in italics are strongly emphasized; a slash indicates the interruption of a word by another; and the interviewer’s reinforcing signals (“hnh,” “Oh yes”) are represented exactly at the position they occurred:

- 1 E Well, I was born in ((area in the former East Germany))
- 2 I hnh
- 3 E actually in ((...)) which is a purely Catholic, purely/mainly.
- 4 Catholic district of ((area, western part))
- 5 I Oh yes
- 6 E ((town))
- 7 I hnh
- 8 E My Father uh ... was captain
- 9 I hnh
- 10 E and ... uh was already county court judge ...
- 11 and then was killed in the war.

- 12 I hmh
- 13 E My mother got stuck alone with my elder brother/he is three years
14 older than me and uh – fled with us.
- 15 I hmh
- 16 E About the journey I don't know anything in detail, I only remember –
17 as a memory that I once uh sat in a train and felt terrible/uh
18 terrible thirst or anyhow hunger
- 19 I hmh
- 20 E and that then somebody came with a pitcher and a cup for us
21 uh poured coffee and that I felt that to be very refresh-
22 I hmh
- 23 E -ing.
- 24 But other memories are also related to that train which
25 maybe point uh to very much later, well, when
26 I hmh
- 27 E came into psychiatry, see.
- 28 Namely, uh – that comes up again as an image from time to time.
29 And we had laid down in that train to go to sleep
30 and I was somehow raised ... uh to be put to sleep
- 31 I hmh
- 32 E And I must have fallen down in the night without waking
33 up.
- 34 I hmh
- 35 E And there I rem/remember that a uh female, not my
36 mother, a female person took me in her arms and smiled
37 at me.
- 38 I hmh
- 39 E Those are my earliest memories.
- 40 I hmh.

This narrative continues over another 17 pages of transcript. The interview is continued in a second meeting. A detailed case analysis is presented by Riemann (1987, pp. 66–200).

In this example, you can see how a narrative interview begins, how the interviewee's life history is unfolded in it, and how the interview slowly approaches issues directly relevant for the research question, but also provides a lot of information that might look less relevant at a first glance. The last unfolds if relevance maybe during the analysis of the interview.

In the narrative interview, on the one hand, the expectation is that factual processes will become evident in it, that “how it really was” will be revealed, and this is linked to the nature of narrative data. On the other hand, analyzing such narrated life histories should lead to a general theory of processes. Schütze (1983) calls this “process structures of the individual life course.” In some areas, such typical courses have been demonstrated empirically, as in the following (see Case Study 14.2).

Case Study 14.2 Professional Biographies of Engineers

Harry Hermanns is another of the main protagonists in developing and using the narrative interview, in this case in the context of professional biographies. Hermanns (1984) has applied this method to around 25 engineers in order to elaborate the patterns of their life histories—patterns of successful professional courses and patterns of courses characterized by crises.

The case studies showed that at the beginning of his or her professional career, an engineer should go through a phase of seeking to acquire professional competencies. The central theme of the professional work of the following years should result from this phase. If one fails with this, the professional start turns into a dead-end.

From the analyses, a series of typical fields for the engineer’s further specialization resulted. A decisive stage is to build up “substance” (i.e., experience and knowledge), for example by becoming an expert in a technical domain. Other types of building up substance are presented by Hermanns.

The next stage of engineers’ careers is to develop a biographical line in the occupation (i.e., to link themselves to a professional topic for a longer time and construct a basis from which they can act). Lines can be accelerated by successes, but also may “die” (e.g., by losing the basis because the competence for securing the line is missing, because the topic loses its meaning in some crisis, or because a new line emerges).

Professional careers fail when one does not succeed in constructing a basis, developing and securing a line, building up competence and substance when one of the central professional tasks distilled from the analysis of professional biographies is not managed successfully.

This example shows how patterns of biographical courses can be elaborated from case studies of professional biographies. These patterns and the stages of the biographical processes contained in them can be taken as points of reference for explaining success and failure in managing the tasks of successful biographies.

What Are the Problems in Conducting the Interview?

One problem in conducting narrative interviews is the systematic violation of the role expectations of both participants. First, expectations relating to the situation of an “interview” are violated, because (at least for the most part) questions in the usual sense of the word are not asked. Second, rarely is an interviewee’s narrative of everyday life

given. These violations of situational expectations often produce irritations in both parties, which prevent them from settling down into the interview situation. Furthermore, although being able to narrate may be an everyday competence, it is mastered to varying degrees. Therefore, it is not always the most appropriate social science method: "We must assume that not all interviewees are capable of giving narrative presentations of their lives. We meet reticent, shy, uncommunicative, or excessively reserved people not only in everyday social life but also in biographical interviews" (Fuchs 1984, p. 249). Additionally, some authors see problems in applying this method in foreign cultures, because the validity of the narrative schema dominant in Western culture cannot simply be presumed for other, non-Western cultures.

Because of these problems, interview training that focuses on active listening (i.e., signaling interest without intervention and on how to maintain the relationship with the interviewee) is necessary in this case, too. This training should be tailor-made for the concrete research question and the specific target group whose narratives are sought. For this, role-plays and rehearsal interviews are recommended here as well. The recordings of these should be systematically evaluated by a group of researchers for problems in conducting the interview and with the interviewer's role behavior.

A precondition for successfully conducting the interview is to explain the specific character of the interview situation to the interviewee. For this purpose, I suggest paying special attention to explaining, in detail, targets and procedures during the phase of recruiting interviewees.

What Is the Contribution to the General Methodological Discussion?

The narrative interview and its attached methodology highlight a qualitative interview's making of the responsive structure and experiences. A model that reconstructs the internal logic of processes stresses the narrative as a gestalt loaded with more than statements and reported "facts." This also provides a solution to the dilemma of the semi-structured interview: how to mediate between freedom to unfold subjective viewpoints and the thematic direction and limitation of what is mentioned. This solution includes three elements:

- The primary orientation is to provide the interviewees with the scope to tell their story (if necessary, for several hours) and to require them to do so.
- Concrete, structuring, or thematically deepening interventions in the interview are postponed until its final part in which the interviewer may take up topics broached before and ask more direct questions. The restriction of the structuring role of the interviewer to the end of the interview and to the beginning is linked to this.
- The generative narrative question serves not only to stimulate the production of a narrative, but also to focus the narrative on the topical area and the period of the biography with which the interview is concerned.

The methodological discussion so far has dealt mainly with questions of how interviewers should behave to keep a narrative going once it is stimulated and to enable it to be finished with the least disturbance possible. But the argument that a good generative narrative question highly structures the following narrative has not yet fully been taken into account. Imprecise and ambiguous generative narrative questions often lead to narratives which remain general, disjointed, and topically irrelevant. Therefore, this method is not the completely open interview that it is often erroneously presented as being in some textbooks. However, the structuring interventions by the interviewer are more clearly localized than in other methods—in their limitation to the beginning and the end of the interview. In the framework thus produced, the interviewees are allowed to unfold their views unobstructed by the interviewer as far as possible. Thus, this method has become a way of employing the potential of narratives as a source of data for social research.

How Does the Method Fit into the Research Process?

Although dependent on the method used for interpretation, the theoretical background of studies using narrative interviews is mainly the analysis of subjective views and activities. Research questions pursued from within this perspective focus biographical processes against the background and in the context of concrete and general circumstances (e.g., life situations such as a phase of professional orientation and a certain social context and biographical period—the postwar period in Germany). The procedure is mainly suitable for developing grounded theories (see Chapter 8). A gradual sampling strategy according to the concept of theoretical sampling (see Chapter 11) seems to be most useful. Special suggestions for interpreting narrative data gathered using this method have been made that take into account their formal characteristics as well as their structure (see Chapter 25). The goal of analysis is often to develop typologies of biographical courses as an intermediate step on the way to theory building (see Chapter 31).

What Are the Limitations of the Method?

One problem linked to the narrative interview is the following assumption: that it allows the researcher to gain access to factual experiences and events. This assumption is expressed in putting narrative and experience in an analogous relationship.

However, what is presented in a narrative is constructed in a specific form during the process of narrating, and memories of earlier events may be influenced by the situation in which they are told. These are further problems which obstruct the realization of some of the claims to the validity of the data, which are linked to the narrative interview.

Furthermore, it is necessary to critically ask another question before applying the method. Is it as appropriate for your own research question, and above all for the interviewees, to rely on the effectiveness of narrative constraints and entanglements in a narrative, as it was during the developmental context of the method? The local

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 biographical details also raises questions of research ethics.

A more practical problem is the sheer amount of textual material in the transcripts 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 unstructured 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 narratives 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 interviewees, 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 remembered 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 situation 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 knowledge that both types of data can make accessible.

The episodic interview yields context-related presentations in the form of a narrative, because these are closer to experiences and their generative context than

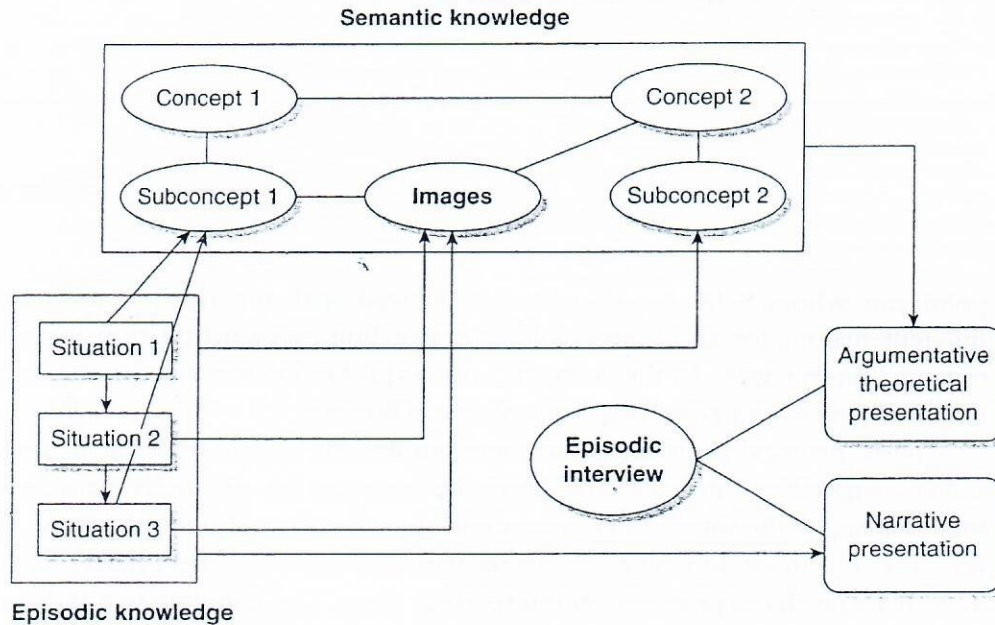


FIGURE 14.1 Forms of Knowledge in the Episodic Interview

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 *zugzwang* 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 experiences 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 interviewee's 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 perspectives 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

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

When would you use a narrative interview, when would you prefer the episodic interview, and when a different type of interview?

(Continued)

If you have a research question in your own research project for which the narrative interview is adequate, develop a narrative generative question.
 Develop an interview guide for an episodic interview for a research question of your own.

Further Reading

The Narrative Interview

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

- Bertaux, D. (ed.) (1981) *Biography and History: The Life History Approach to Social Sciences*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
 Denzin, N.K. (1988) *Interpretive Biography*. London: SAGE.
 Rosenthal, G. (2004) "Biographical Research," in C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. Gubrium, and D. Silverman (eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: SAGE. pp. 48–65.

The Episodic Interview

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

- Flick, U. (1994) "Social Representations and the Social Construction of Everyday Knowledge: Theoretical and Methodological Queries," *Social Science Information*, 33: 179–197.
 Flick, U. (1995) "Social Representations," in R. Harré, J. Smith, and L.v. Langenhove (eds.), *Rethinking Psychology*. London: SAGE. pp. 70–96.
 Flick, U. (2000a) "Episodic Interviewing," in M. Bauer and G. Gaskell (eds.), *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound: A Practical Handbook*. London: SAGE. pp. 75–92.
 Flick, U. (2007b) *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE. Ch. 5.

Narratives between Biography and Episode

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

- Bruner, J. (1987) "Life as Narrative," *Social Research*, 54: 11–32.
 Bruner, J. (1991) "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 18: 1–21.