Rob Evans*

NAVIGATING THE UNCONDITIONAL:
DOING RESEARCH THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN

> We went on up the narrow strait, thus
> anxiously. On this side lay Scylla, while
> on that Charybdis … (Homer, 1992)

Not long ago, I wrote this in a blind peer-review:

My particular criticism is focused on the data collection and analysis. About the interviews used, we are given practically no information at all. Where, when, who, how, why, what? None of these famous 6 companions to explanation and description are deployed to explain or justify the methods employed. Grounded Theory is a "style", and is left, as always sadly, as self-explanatory, self-justificatory and self-sufficient. We know nothing of the interviews, we are informed they were machine-transcribed and nothing else. Evidently, they must have been translated into English at some point, also machine-translated? Presumably only the distilled coded phrases or thematic codes were translated, or am I mistaken? Thus, in the densely packed paragraphs of data, presented in clean packages allowing no ambivalence, we have – what? The words of anonymous interviewees from somewhere? A city, we are told towards the end of the paper. The fact that the majority of the interviewees have a migration background and speak the language of the author only as L2 is also only revealed close to the end of the paper and almost as an afterthought. To sum up, the methods employed here resemble those used almost universally in research using interview data and the analysis of 'naturally occurring speech'. The analysis takes place on data created in research group discussion. This is not sound.

I do not necessarily feel proud of what I wrote. You may not agree with my criticisms, you may feel I am unwarrantably harsh, dismissive even. Yet, time and again I read and hear the same. Theories are named but not accounted for, let alone explained and contextualized. Methods are named, too, and are assumed to be self-explanatory as well as self-justified. People are interviewed alone, in groups, by cohort, they are given numbers and codes, and their words, which we are asked to take on faith, are strewn up and down texts and presented as demonstrations of 'evidence'. On the basis of their bare lexical meaning. I feel this is not enough and that we all learn to do better.

More to the point, we all learn the hard way as well. Because we navigate on automatic pilot at our peril. Odysseus had the choice between Charybdis' whirlpool and Scylla's cliff. We all, in different ways, have to find our way between the rocks and the maelstrom – without the assistance of a goddess. Pierre Bourdieu, who I value particularly

---

* **Rob Evans** – formerly Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg, Germany; e-mail: rob.evans@t-online.de; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1168-4121.

for his meticulous, dogged, even niggling attention to differences and distinctions, provides the signpost notion at the back of this editorial project when he states that:

tous les moments de mon histoire, et en particulier les différents partis que j'ai pu prendre en matière de recherche, peuvent apparaître comme rendus à leur nécessité sociologique, c'est-à-dire, sous ce rapport, justifiés, et, en tout cas, comme beaucoup plus rationnels ou même raisonnés et raisonnables qu'ils ne l'ont été en réalité, un peu comme s'ils étaient sortis d'un projet conscient de soi dès l'origine. Or je sais, et je ne ferai rien pour le cacher, qu'en vérité je n'ai découvert que peu à peu, même sur le terrain de la recherche, les principes qui guidaient ma pratique	every moment of my history and in particular the different parts I have been able to develop in my research may appear to be inevitable sociologically, that is, justified and in any case much more rational and reasonable than they were in reality, a little as if they emerged from a project in which I was fully aware from the very beginning. But I know and I shan't make any effort to hide the fact that in truth I only discovered bit by bit even in the field of research the principles that were guiding my practice

(Bourdieu, 2004: 12, my translation)

The principles guiding our practice that emerged in the course of our respective researcher lives need to be seen and explained in all their complexity and incompletion so that they may be exposed to view and burnished in the light of day.

The request

The dissatisfaction, or better still, the creeping desperation that can be heard in my possibly over-peevish peer-review at the start of this piece, prompted me to turn to a number of my peers and ask them to look into their hearts and disclose how they do research and why. They were asked to:

- Discuss/illustrate/explain/analyse the 'place' – the theory, methodology, research methods, and above all analysis/interpretation/presentation of the 'results' of their research – that they write from and do their research in.
- A particular focus should be on 'data' (of whatever kind, however they may be understood) and the process of analysis after the phase of data collection.

In a previous project in this journal (Evans, 2024) the emphasis was on the biographical research trajectory of the individual authors, on the concatenation of biography and formation as a researcher. Of course, here, too, the biographical element would obviously be equally crucial, but this time around I wanted to know more and indeed very precisely what *is* the research process for other researchers? In other words, what are the

theoretical, social, private impulses motivating their choice of method, their definition of field of research, their attitude to co-researchers, their understanding of reflexivity and interaction, and how, from project to project, case to case, encounter to encounter do they "do" it? Differences in methods, presentation and discussion, also in organisation, hierarchy, and status are obvious moments of tension, moments of differentiation. All of these must have exerted some influence on their work sometime, in some way. The response was mixed. Some who were asked wanted more time, some found the challenge too great when they were already up to their ears in work. Four took up the challenge, though, and welcomed the opportunity to sit back and take stock. Like them, I wish, too, to piece together in the following pages, if not the physical path and the days that led me to biography research, then at least the fundamental conditions I felt I had to confront and try to meet, if I wanted to discover, describe and explain what it is that I feel the biographical interview is the most fitting method for doing that job.

Doing research the way I do

To describe the way I have sought to navigate the unconditional for my research over the last 25 years or so, I have first to consider the relationship between language and society from the standpoint of inter-subjectivity and of language as action. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the contribution, theoretical and empirical, of the research interview for biographical research and the relevance of language data produced in the biographical narrative will be examined. A 'grammar of interactive discourse' is sketched in, which is the machine room of my research practice. My concluding remarks will consider some of the arguments for the language approach I cannot do other than adopt.

Biographical interviews and language data:
Questions and Perspectives

I am a biography researcher. I use 'unstructured' qualitative interviews, which – an important caveat – however, are highly structured by my constantly shifting agendas, are conditioned by my consciously-held hobby horses, and are of course very much shaped by my unwillingly, half- or scarcely-acknowledged inhibitions around, and preconceived notions about, the other people I interact with. Yet, I struggle bravely with myself, as I am sure we all do, and work hard to achieve some 'good enough' (see West, 2024) rapport with my interviewees and my peers.

Researching change in lives and understanding how change is lived and expressed in interaction can be done in many ways in biographical interviews (see for example, Alheit, 2002, 2018; Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Evans, 2019, 2020, 2021; Finnegan, 2016;

Formenti, 2006; González Monteagudo, 2011; Merrill & West, 2009; West, 1996). The superficial script of the interview which starts from routine interactions, assumed behaviours and relatively stable expectations is expressive of processes of change. The biographical story, the language content of which is my field of work, represents evidence of the resources mobilised by the individual in order to – as another leading exponent of biography research, Pierre Dominicé put it – "face up to the events in their life" (Dominicé, 2001: 28, my translation). I argue that close analysis of the language resources employed in the interview drives the analysis of the interview talk. The 'grammars' of change, disorientation or resistance, as the resources of experience are brought to bear on narratives which unfold within the framework of the biographical interview, are a complex play of discourse elements. Professional, personal, cultural scripts and frames of self-identification (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1997; Goffman, 1981; Schiffrin, 1993) are brought into play with the theorizing process of accounting for self in change.

Ontological and epistemological first things

Right from the start, the question of what things count as 'facts' in qualitative research (*i.e.* the ontological view of research undertakings) calls for some words of clarification. Qualitative research is made up of a 'spectrum' of methods (Flick, von Kardorff & Steinke, 2004: 6), it is "work in progress" rather than an "abstract and ossified set of technical prescriptions" (Dey, 2004: 92), and in Jennifer Mason's view it "certainly does not represent a unified set of techniques or philosophies" (Mason, 1996: 3). Qualitative research addresses vital areas of individual and group experience of social reality by observing, questioning and recording the testimony of the actors themselves in sites of social interaction chosen for the collection of data. Social reality, thus, may be understood as the interpretation of meanings and contexts that are created in social interaction (Flick, von Kardorff & Steinke, 2004: 6). This means that:

reality is created interactively and becomes meaningful subjectively and that it is transmitted and becomes effective in collective and individual instances of interpretation. Accordingly, in qualitative research, communication takes on a predominant role. In methodological terms this means that strategies of data collection themselves have a communicative dialogic character (Flick, von Kardorff & Steinke, 2004: 7).

If the biographical interview is seen simply as a key to open some kind of door into the thinking, perhaps, of individuals and thereby release a flood of thoughts and utterances about things and feelings, times and events, *etc.*, then the data analysis must presumably be occupied with sifting and separating out largely what is *said*. The researcher then steps back and presents the words, the things said, the information given. She/he summarises and interprets them in his/her own words. This is, put simply, what I find so frequently in interview-based research. And this excites the sense of

disappointment referred to above that I feel each time I encounter it. Words are given and presented as self-explanatory, sufficient in themselves.

But the work of the interview can be seen altogether differently. The data, language(d) data, can be seen as constituted in the interview in the interaction and as a process. The talk is not analysed as a collection of 'facts' or straight 'examples', rather, the speech is understood as action and interaction. The *construction* of dialogic talk in the interview is analysed. The interview is then no longer a 'realist' instrument for looking at the grittiness of something that is 'out there' somewhere in the 'real world'. The interview is a space for the narrative construction of biographical experience, what I would call a learning biography.

Seen in this way, the research interview accesses stories or narratives through which people describe their world (Silverman, 2000). This approach sees talk as evidence of the joint generation by interviewer and interviewees of plausible, changing, incomplete accounts of the world. The interview is employed not as a 'collection' of objective data or as a window onto the observable facts 'out there', beyond the people engaged in talk. It is a sensitive space, in which the linguistic repertoires or methods which people draw upon in constructing accounts in interactive encounters can unfold (Seale, 1998: 212-215).

Interaction, discourse, inter-discursivity

The epistemological importance of this perspective is that the *interactive features* of the data are highlighted. We cannot know in any final way what people are thinking, but we can follow how interviewees are positioned and position themselves in discoursal fashion in the course of the continually changing contexts of the interview. For around and beyond the immediate action of the talk, the narration, the conversation, there is a context of relations, exerting their influence on the conjoint work of the interaction.

This points to the influence of discourse on learning biographies as well as the influence of a learning biography on discourse practices. The understanding of discourse I adopt sees discourse in the overarching chains or sequences of language (semiotic sequences, language in all conceivable forms, codes, linguistic, visual, symbols, practices) that in relation to one another (*interdiscursivity*) offer or impose conceptual frameworks of cultural and political narratives – in Michel Foucault's words "these ready-made syntheses, these bundles of ideas that one commonly assumes without any examination at all, these connections that are recognized as given before the game starts" (Foucault, 1969: 34, my translation). Jürgen Habermas defines the *Lebenswelt* in a similar useful fashion as "the unquestioned foundation of everything given as well as the unquestioned frame within which every problem I have to cope with presents itself to me" (Habermas, 1981: 199, my translation).

The methods arising from the research perspective I adopt must be able to generate ontologically stable data around the research questions I formulate. There should, then, be a theoretical and methodological fit between the overarching model of social experience I am advancing – *i.e.* that social interaction is accomplished in artful, common-sense fashion, involving accounts which combine particulars of the social and cultural practices of individuals as well as their diffusely interactional practices (Garfinkel, 1967; Silverman ed., 1997: 114) – and the methods of data collection and data analysis I have opted to use.

To reduce this to a 'really useful' way of seeing our interest in practice in specific settings, I recall Harvey Sacks' famous 'this-and-that' which he applied to the work of the Chicago school of ethnography of the 1930s. The relevance of the works of the Chicago sociologists, he suggests, 'is that they do contain a lot of information about this and that. And this-and-that is what the world is made up of' (Sacks, 1992a: 27). To approach 'this-and-that', I can draw upon a series of 'ontological components' that Jennifer Mason proposes might form the aspects of social reality that a piece of research wishes to explain, I can pick out the following as being directly implicated in the perspective I employ:

- interactions, situations, social relations,
- social or cultural practices,
- stories, narratives, biographies,
- identity, self,
- understandings (Mason, 1996: 11-12).

According to the basic theoretical perspective employed here, then, these research components broadly represent practices and are all facets of "doing being ordinary" (Sacks, 1992b: 215-221). On the basis of this selection, the following question must be put: what represents or might represent knowledge or evidence of these components of social reality (Mason, 1996: 13)? All of these data sources can be taken as sources of 'naturally occurring talk', none of them a simple 'window' onto the world (Seale, 1998: 215), none the mere objectivist 'registration' of realities ignoring the context and the history of their coming about that Bourdieu criticizes (Bourdieu, 1980: 87).

Ecologies of knowledge

The wider contexts in which participants are active I have always understood as, in Gale Miller's words, interconnected "ecologies of knowledge" in which situation-specific interactional meanings are organized (Miller, 1997: 168). According to this view of things, subjects are able to make use of the resources of different, socially organized settings to which they belong (or to which they are positioned as belonging, for example) in order to discursively constitute and reconstitute themselves and the institutional

settings in which they interact. More recently my approach has embraced the theoretical enrichment of the spaces of biographical interaction as open, contextual, temporally and spatially relational "ecologies of person and place" (Sawyer, 2021) that expands the ontological view to include the embodied and the non-human (Evans, 2014, 2021).

Discursive processes of identity construction, then, are situated in language interaction at many, at multiple, levels. Interaction and relations of reciprocity between individual subjects and others provide the framework within which 'selves' are constructed in communication with others. The changing relationship of individual subjects to their own and others' words, current or long-past, influence identity construction at every step. The language available in many ways to individuals permits them to describe themselves and the world, and the relationships of membership within (and dissociation from) recognisable groups. Relationships of membership and belonging to recognisable values or characteristics, to identities or stigmas, are constructed locally via the situating power of indexicality. In this way, 'situated' or global identities that intersect constantly in discourse are created (De Fina, 2009, 2019; De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006: 9-15).

Language, voice, and the 'grammar' of interactive discourse

I am interested, then, in linguistic analysis of people's spoken language[1] which can take account of the production of discourse in interaction, the 'embeddedness' of such discursive practices in the institutional and social context of their immediate production, and which also sees discursive practices as "social practice" which is "socially constitutive", in Norman Fairclough's words: "signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough, 1992: 64).

Insights into the particular linguistic structures emergent in interview talk and particularly the dynamics of interactive narrative forms (Schiffrin, 1993, 1996, 2006; Mishler, 2006) provide a powerful analytical alternative to the objectivist, 'representational' view of language, which proposes that the researcher proceed analytically from 'words to world', *i.e.* that she adopt a one-to-one relationship of lexical and semantic equivalence between what is said and what is. Examining at close quarters stories told in interaction tells us certainly something about the accumulative, regularised, formalised way in which experience is remembered and retold, but we can also look more closely at the way narratives emerge in the moment of communication: how

---

[1] The discussion and analysis of biographical narrative talk is always carried out on the original language of the talk (Russian, French, German, English, and so on). This means that rough translations of transcript extracts are provided *only* for the convenience of a broader audience unacquainted with the languages spoken and are never included in the analysis process. See Pilch Ortega's important discussion of the possibilities and limits of translation in her paper in this collection.

does a story actually reflect both the underlying narrative competence that lies in wait for the opportunity to 'break out' and the interactional contingencies in which talk is co-constructed? (Schiffrin, 2006: 23). Deborah Schiffrin, in fact, notes how little we know about how experiences of various types are verbalised in our life stories. We know equally little, she argues, about "whether (or how) language will reflect the different sources of information that work their way into our stories." In order to understand told narratives more fully, then, "we need to examine the language through which we incorporate differently grounded pieces of our lives into a single narrative and the different facets of 'self' that are involved in doing so." (Schiffrin, 2006: 207).

As I see it, just as we cannot pass from 'words to world' and construct our analyses of social worlds on a one-to-one basis with the talk produced in an interview, we cannot pass from 'words to mind'. But we can see in the linguistic expressions used once, or used repeatedly, in interaction the shifting elements of what Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs, in their study of the linguistic construction of narratives (Capps & Ochs, 1995), call a 'grammar' that is used in constructing and sharing relationships, identities, views. The 'grammar' in this form is, of course, only immediately valid for the British and North American branches of some kind of rough World English. For transcripts in German (Evans, 2004), French (Evans, 2022a), or Russian, for example (Evans, 2022b), I use equivalent illocutionary resources identifiable in these languages (Wierzbicka, 1991). Other researchers are urged to consider what may be the forms of experiential grammar relevant in their own work. The 'grammar' Capps and Ochs propose (for greater detail and examples of its employment in transcribed talk, see Evans, 2008, 2013a, 2013b) embraces most importantly the following:

Changing states:

- adverbs and adverbial phrases, describing the 'how' and the 'how much/how fast' of events, beliefs, emotions and notions used to describe loss of control and abnormal circumstances, the unexpected/the unaccountable/the sudden;
- 'epistemological' or mental verbs facilitating internal dialogues, internal reflections, thoughts signal heightened self-awareness;
- adverbs of place and time, used for situating the speaker in a place of comfort, safety, danger or emotion.

Agency and helplessness:

- choice of semantic role as agent or actor / helpless or victim;
- diminished agency can also be achieved through the use of verbs of necessity, which is also termed 'modality';
- hypothetical past constructions can indicate lack of "volitional control over actions and emotions by talking about them as taking place in a hypothetical past world" (Capps & Ochs, 1995: 70);

- 'try' constructions ('I was trying to', 'I tried' – but it was no use!) can be used to diminish agency or initiative, suggesting helplessness. Or the opposite may indicate determination;
- negation generally has an obvious overall effect on the shade and colour of a narrative.

Hedging:

- intensifiers (such as 'really', 'a lot of') and de-intensifiers or hedging ('like', 'kind of/ sort of', 'maybe', 'just'). Certainty, necessity, opinion, belief and factuality are made hearable. "Their meaning is crucial to the interaction mediated by speech ..." and these meanings "are often remarkably complex" (Wierzbicka, 1991: 341).

Prosody:

- emphatic stress, increased volume of speech, stretched or drawled sounds, raised pitch, repetition, halting delivery or hesitation and voice qualities (desperation, hope) are 'prosodic devices'.

Interaction, co-construction, interdiscursivity

So, what does this kind of detailed micro-analysis of language in talk contribute to our understanding of the biographical narrative? As a research methodology, the understanding of discursive-biographical interviewing as a branch of qualitative research assumes that the autobiographical research interview is interactive, co-constructed, flooded with inter-discursivity, and that it constructs and constitutes local action and meaning-making. It contributes to the construction in situ, of social reality.

As a method it lays bare the turn by turn shared construction of selves and identities (*i.e.* how individuals dialogically and interactively make meaning of themselves, make themselves understood, and are made understandable by the joint process of experiencing othered-experience (see Luckmann, 1981: 58). The detail at the micro level serves to document openly how this meaning making takes place, how this is affected by group belonging, by ethnic or cultural discourses (Pavlenko, 2007; Wierzbicka, 1991), by gender, age, professional and educational positioning, and so on. The detail won in the close analysis can be generalizable over the length of a complete biographical narrative, and to an extent generalizable to other narratives and talk of the same person(s). The analysis, if it is documented and directly linked to the transcript, is rendered apparent, as is the interview transcript and the theoretical and practical criteria drawn upon in its making (Ochs, 1979; Wengraf, 2001).

Much of this is arguably *not* the case with extensive theoretical meta-interpretations which are developed *beyond* the talk. While in such cases the interest is frequently centred on the coding and generalisation of the talk as representative data, in my chosen

approach, through detailed linguistic-discursive analysis of the life-story the focus can be directed to the meaning-making in spoken interaction. The strong argument of the 'objective' approach (for example, Schütze, 1981; Wengraf, 2001; Bertaux, 2005) that the emergent-contingent language of the interview interaction – the 'told life' – attains generalizability only through comparison and contrast with the 'lived life', runs in my view the risk of reducing the language of the biographical-narrative interview to a range of highly theoretical text genres against which the filtered-out 'content' of a life course is compared. Protagonists of this approach indicate the language in passing, if at all, to move on effortlessly to the second order analysis of the social significance of the biographical narrative as a whole. This can produce quite remarkably subtle levels of analysis, as in Bettina Dausien's incomparable *Biografie und Geschlecht* (1996), but more often the talk and the narratives of the interview subject play a very minor role in comparison to the researcher's voice.

On another plane, however attractive it may be to employ the concept of a universal 'grammar of communication' to encompass the totality of the interactive, meaning-making, communicative act (Habermas, 1981: 207; Dausien, 2001: 59), this concept has no place in the theoretical approach I am advocating. Such a universal concept not merely tends to over-emphasize the influence of 'structure' over 'agency', thereby circumnavigating 'society' and its emergent character, but it easily and willingly falls prey to the temptation of innate 'deep structures' (famously Chomsky, 1964) which, if accepted, more or less negate all creative interaction, co-construction, and interdiscursivity, the three cardinal concepts most apt for observing, analysing and understanding what is happening in told life stories. And what is happening beyond them, too.

Simply because all interaction is observably made up of innumerable 'bits' of language-mediated communication, this does not mean we must, or can, consider every single 'bit'. It is probably self-evident that not *all* examples of interaction in a lengthy interview can be taken into account; but to draw the conclusion from this that the mass of individual bits or their sum is therefore secondary to an act of generalization which passes over the detail of the interaction in order to achieve a higher order of abstraction based on meta-analysis, seems problematic. In any case, a black and white choice between objectifying, generalizing approaches and over-particular micro analyses for the analysis and interpretation of life history data is not really the point at issue. Just as a total biographical life story cannot be collected (Bertaux, 2005), neither realistically (nor usefully) can one single narrative be *totally* analysed for every detail of the language use. Indeed, there would be little point in such an exercise, precisely because of the massive repetition that must be expected (Tannen, 2007). This is, as far as I can see, the vindication for applying a discursive-linguistic approach to *parts* of the told life story. Tom Wengraf, too, can see a justification for employing 'paralinguistics' – the

way words are said – "on small, selected segments [of the transcript] which require especially close and accurate description and interpretation" (Wengraf, 2001: 216). The researcher is part of the research and a major actor in the interaction. That she takes full methodological and ethical responsibility for the selection of those parts which are discussed, analysed and communicated, goes without saying. Linguistic evidence – repeated language practices we can call them too – found in one part of a life-history will be findable, will be hearable elsewhere in that story, too.

This, then, is the point at issue. The detailed linguistic analysis of parts of a biographical narrative and the *presentation* of this analysis in talks, publications and communications – as extensively and exhaustively as possible – is able to provide evidence of the local construction of social action. Further, the comparison of specific language phenomena across the whole told life (*i.e.* the whole current narrative – the next narrative will be in many ways different) with phenomena observed in other narratives (same or other narrators), *i.e.* a corpus-based approach (Bauer & Aarts, 2000; Evans, 2004), is able to provide documentable, generalizable and falsifiable data relative to potentially large numbers of interviewed co-researchers. Lives, and the communicated, *languaged*, form their telling takes, are observable, understandable and describable.

And so, as the rocks recede and the waters are becalmed for the moment, we can turn now to the pieces written for this volume.

Five papers in search of their authors

If I preface the following remarks about this first selection of invited contributions on the topic of doing research 'like the way I do'[2] by citing Bourdieu in his *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Bourdieu, 2000) with the observation that this invitation:

est faite pour déconcerter aussi bien ceux qui réfléchissent sur les sciences de l'homme sans les pratiquer que ceux qui les pratiquent sans réfléchir	is done in order to disconcert as much those who reflect on the social sciences without practising them as those who practice without reflecting

(Bourdieu, 2000: 221)

then it is done in order to give pause, in the hope that by stopping to think and take stock, it may stimulate the imagination. Bourdieu is adamant in repeating the unforeseen directions his apprenticeship as a researcher took (Bourdieu, 2000, 2004) while toiling on a theoretical level to clarify why his navigation of the unconditional is unequivocal. C. Wright Mills suggests that to sit down and clarify what you think,

---

[2] An irresistible reference to the 1980s torch song of the same name by Melissa Etheridge (1988).

you 'present' your thought to yourself, which is often called 'thinking clearly'. Then when you feel that you have it straight, you present it to others – and often find that you have not made it clear.

He goes on: "You will get new ideas as you work in the context of presentation. In short, it will become a new context of discovery …" (Mills, 2000: 222), which will stand as a motto for all five of the papers in this collection.

Hazel R. Wright

Hazel R. Wright is a many-sided researcher. At the start of her paper *Researching Thoughtfully* she echoes Bourdieu's remarks about the unpredictability of the researcher career, when she writes:

I believe that a researcher who has learned to think-in-context will naturally continue to do research with sensitivity as their career develops, despite the pressures of time and cost restraints. Muddling through to a satisfactory end can feel challenging but it enables significant learning to take place …

Muddling and 'messiness' are, in fact, central notions in Wright's piece. She has worked in many different areas of education and publishing and has never ceased to extend her qualifications as she moved from one area of work and research to the next. She provides on the way an encyclopaedic review of the readings and ideas that emerged from the professional contexts in which she practised her skills as a researcher, readings which – like those of Jennifer Nias (1991) or Lynda Measor and Peter Woods (1991) not only take me back to my own researcher beginnings, but will be invaluable, too, to any researchers starting out. Wright very much emphasises the 'craft' element of research and particularly, research writing (see on this Mills, 2000, Appendix 195-226; Grummell & Finnegan, 2020: 1) and leads into an important discussion on fictionalisation and experimental storying in biography research. Wright's ultimate message here is the unconditional development and cultivation of *thoughtfulness* in every aspect of research – reading, writing, using sources, sharing and discussing, presenting and publishing. Care, caution, being prepared to fail at times, and ready to take ownership of your original ideas are offered as help in steering past the rocks.

Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha

Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha proposes a cautious balance between principled openness to alternative research methods, involving the readiness to question oneself and be prepared to read findings in different ways, with an equally principled commitment to certainty about the researcher's fundamental position and care not to confuse openness with arbitrariness, hence the perhaps for some rather daunting title of his piece: *Epistemological and Methodological Foundations of Adult Education Research – A Personal Statement*. The weight of the title's words is, however, part and parcel of

Schmidt-Hertha's message. Openness and a "willingness not only to research lifelong learning but also to practice it and to repeatedly venture into at least partially unknown territory, even at an advanced stage of my academic career" are precepts that he asserts forcefully. Participation in a heterogenous group of researchers in a research training group at the University of Frankfurt provided him with an experience of interdisciplinary collaboration that he admits to having never experienced again anywhere else. The lasting effect of this experience can be heard in his plea for openness, dialogue, quality through exchange and his recognition of the need for 'time out' in order to tap into creative energy beyond the routine. Like Wright, with her notebook and pencil by the bed to "capture those bright ideas" that come unannounced, or Høyen's doodles and mindmaps, Schmidt-Hertha tunes in to new ideas in order to maintain the pragmatic balance he seeks. His is a thoughtful piece of writing that by his own admission did him some good to write and it will, I am certain, be read by others in the same spirit.

Marianne Høyen

Marianne Høyen is certainly in this discrete group of researchers the most professionally eclectic, the most cross-disciplinary by formation of them all. Her reflections, entitled *Can I Be a Universal Academic and Stay Loyal to My Cultural Roots? A Danish Researcher Reflects on the Choices this Entails* are not wholly mirrored in the title, for we have here much more than a discussion of cultural roots per se. Nevertheless, Høyen's account of her very much less than linear research career do provide us with important insights into an evolving educational landscape in Denmark which serves as a set of changing scenes for the extraordinary fearlessness that she has evidenced throughout her changing work life. It is worth noting that one reviewer of this piece succumbed to the stereotypes surrounding the natural sciences in whose corridors Høyen wandered for so long and assumed she must be male. Corrected, he was still more intrigued and impressed by her repeated job changes and her scientific-technical portfolio of skills and expertise. For this is, in fact, a story of social mobility in a period of growing neoliberal commodification of learning, of life in the academic precariat, but also of 'high' academic standards that struggled to find a place in an anglicised, part-time, short-termist world. Høyen seems to have succeeded against all the odds in becoming something like a 'universal academic' through her inquisitiveness, her modesty and the ability to find connections in different types of knowledge that make it possible for her to establish a sense of over-arching coherence to this academic meandering that is very much of our times. Something she wrote twelve years (Høyen, 2013) ago sums her piece up well, I feel, when she states: "disciplines are not divided by insurmountable walls, but by gradual transitions".

Angela Pilch Ortega

Angela Pilch Ortega sees research as a learning process in which the researcher continually questions herself and her assumptions and confronts theoretical and methodological challenges to do research in an ethically and politically responsible manner. Grounded in the theory and practice of biography research in the Austrian university environment, she describes how it has been her research over decades in the postcolonial context of Chiapas, Mexico that has formed her as she is today, hence the title of her piece: *Doing Research in a Postcolonial Context. Navigating the Unconditional from a Biographical Research Perspective*. Postcolonial learning gathered and studied in postcolonial biographical narratives opened up for Pilch Ortega a new critical understanding of the relationship in the Chiapas context between learning and the community or collective, as well as the connections between research, collective learning and action for a better world. The complexities of postcolonial narratives threw light for her on questions of power, knowledge production, Indigenous knowledge, as well as questioning Western/European notions of agency and individualism. Perhaps most importantly, Pilch Ortega elaborates on the critical insights she has gained around data collection, the translation of multilingual, non-Western language data, analysis and discussion of postcolonial language narratives, and the responsibility to make evident and circumvent the 'appropriation' of people's testimonies in the research and publication process. Her objective, she says, is to navigate through the pitfalls and snares of postcolonial domination and create a relational space in which new knowledge can emerge. To quote her here, she says:

What has stayed with me to this day is my passion for research, my enquiring curiosity and the creativity that can unfold in the face of challenging research situations. The precondition for this is critical reflexivity as a key element of all research, which also requires sufficient time and space to develop

And in view of the state of the world as I write and we read, she adds: "we need creative research more than ever".

Hazel R. Wright, Inger Helen Midtgård, Donata Puntil, Berit Bareksten, Gaia Del Negro and Silvia Luraschi

The final text, *Dignity Through Touch for an Ethics of Care: Pandemical Tales*, given us by Hazel R. Wright, Inger Helen Midtgård, Donata Puntil, Berit Bareksten, Gaia Del Negro and Silvia Luraschi, was not in fact written upon invitation as the others were, though the existence of the work was long known to me. This text, which finally became a text at all after morphing through various forms, as many options for presentation were for long open and undecided, was born in the pandemic. In the years following the pandemic, these 6 researchers from the UK, Norway, Italy/UK, and Italy have shared

their ideas and their feelings, freely, profoundly, generously and creatively. They have done this on walks beside fjords or on Mediterranean hills; the ideas have been volunteered, spun out, shared and jointly experienced in all their levels and ranges of pain, sorrow, incomprehension and joy over meals, glasses of wine, at writing desks alone and together, face to face and on-screen, on successive sheets of paper, through months and into years. The history of this collaboration, in fact, predates the work on this text. At least as far back as 2018, in Bergen, three of the authors sat together around a table and re-ignited bonds and conversations going back even further to earlier workshops, conversations, initial sharings of ideas, poems, memories. The (currently) final decision to shape this choral flow of narratives the way we can read it here is a way to navigate the crashing waters of research presentation and the wandering rocks of the academic audience. The academic audience can now read and judge. One reviewer reacted enthusiastically to this mix of research backgrounds, personal experience, modes of expression. He wrote – and his words leapt from the page, from the review form, in a way reviews all too rarely do, and they shall therefore be the closing words for now:

I found each of the six stories in your manuscript poetic, soulful, inspiring, and illustrative of the depth of and need for humanity within a crisis. I reacted differently to each story. Initially when I read the different stories, I also started to look for patterns, and I resonated with the themes and frameworks that you mention that underpin your stories. I like that you explore each of these, with each being individually and collectively important. (I especially loved your discussion of dignity, which opened up new meanings of that concept to me.) … Again, thank you for letting me read this manuscript. I loved it. And, thank you for giving me hope at a nearly overwhelming time.

References

Alheit, P. (2002) Biographieforschung und Erwachsenenbildung. In: M. Kraul & W. Marotzki (eds.) *Biographische Arbeit. Perspektiven erziehungswissenschaftlicher Biographieforschung*. Opladen: Leske+Budrich, 211-240.

Alheit, P. (2018) The Concept of „Biographicity" as Background Concept of Lifelong Learning. *Dyskursy Mlodych Andragogow*, 19, 9-22.

Alheit, P. & Dausien, B. (2002) Bildungsprozesse über die Lebensspanne und lebenslanges Lernen. In: R. Tippelt (ed.) *Handbuch Bildungsforschung*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 565-585.

Bauer, M.W. & Aarts, B. (2000) Corpus construction: a principle for qualitative data collection. In: M.W. Bauer & G. Gaskell (eds.) *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound. A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage, 19-37.

Bertaux, D. (2005) *L'enquête et ses méthodes. Le récit de vie* (2nd ed.). Paris: Armand Colin.

Bourdieu, P. (1980) *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Bourdieu, P. (2004) *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse*. Paris: Raisons d'agir Éditions.

Capps, L. & Ochs, E. (1995) *Constructing Panic. The discourse of agoraphobia*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Chomsky, N. (1964) *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*. The Hague: Mouton.

Dausien, B. (1996) *Biographie und Geschlecht*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Dausien, B. (2001) Erzähltes Leben – erzähltes Geschlecht? Aspekte der narrativen Konstruktion von Geschlecht im Kontext der Biographieforschung. *Feministische Studien*, 2, 57-73.

De Fina, A. (2009) Narratives in interview – The case of accounts. For an interactional approach to narrative genres. *Narrative Inquiry* [online], 19(2), 233-258. Available at: https://10.1075/ni.19.2.03def.

De Fina, A. (2019) The Interview as an Interactional Event. In: Peter L. Patrick, Monika M. Schmid & K. Zwaan (eds.) *Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin*. Cham: Springer, 21-40.

De Fina, A., Schiffrin, D. & Bamberg, M. (2006) Introduction. In: A. De Fina, D. Schiffrin & M. Bamberg (eds.) *Discourse and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-23.

Dey, I. (2004) Grounded Theory. In: C. Seale, G. Gobo, J.F. Gubrium & D. Silverman (eds.) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 80-93.

Dominicé, P. (2001) Configuration et reconfiguration de la vie adulte. *Carriérologie*, 8, 123-130.

Etheridge, M. (1988) Like the Way I Do. On: *Melissa Etheridge*. Island Records.

Evans, R. (2004) *Learning discourse. Learning Biographies, Embedded speech and Discourse Identity in Students' Talk*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang.

Evans, R. (2008) L'entretien auto/biographique et les paroles. L'analyse du langage employé dans les entretiens discursifs-narratifs. *Pratiques de formations/Analyses*, 55, 193-222.

Evans, R. (2013a) Biography research, the qualitative interview and language 'data': analysing dialogic interaction. In: A. Szerląg (ed.) *Wielokulturowość – międzykulturowość w edukacji akademickiej. Ku nowej jakości kształcenia*. Wrocław Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT 231-245.

Evans, R. (2013b) Emotions close up: The interview, learning biographies and the language of emotion. *Plumilla educativa,* 11, 11-26.

Evans, R. (2014) A body of words: body, language and meaning in biographical research. In: L. Formenti, L. West & M. Horsdal (eds.) *Embodied narratives. Connecting stories, bodies, cultures and ecologies*. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 83-105.

Evans, R. (2019) Learning biographies in a European space for social mediation. [Biografias de aprendizagem num espaço europeu de mediação social]. *Comunicação e Sociedade, especial* [online], 71-88. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.0(2019).3061.

Evans, R. (2020) Examining a Kazakh Student's Biographical Narrative and the Discourses She Lives By. In: H. Wright & M. Høyen (eds.) *Discourses We Live By. Narratives of Educational and Social Endeavour*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 383-402.

Evans, R. (2021) Biographical Interviews and the Micro-context of Biographicity: Closely Listening for Meaning, Learning and Voice. In: A. Bainbridge, L. Formenti & L. West (eds.) *Discourses, Dialogue and Diversity in Biographical Research. An Ecology of Life and Learning*. Leiden: Brill Sense, 39-52.

Evans, R. (2022a) Learning to Make (and Remake) Society: Social Mediation and Mediators' Learning Biographies. In: R. Evans, E. Kurantowicz & E. Lucio-Villegas (eds.) *Remaking Communities and Adult Learning*. Leiden: Brill, 205-227.

Evans, R. (2022b) Minsk Narratives. *Dyskursy Mlodych Andragogow/Adult Education Discourses* [online], 24(2), 22-44. Available at: https://doi.org/10.34768/dma.vi23.646.

Evans, R. (2024) News from somewhere. *Dyskursy Mlodych Andragogow/Adult Education Discourses* [online], 25, 9-20. Available at: https://doi.org/10.61824/dma.vi25.752.

Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Finnegan, F. (2016) Let's get critical!: biographical research, critical realism and the challenge of producing emancipatory knowledge. In: R. Evans (ed.) *Before, beside and after (beyond) the biographical narrative*. Duisburg: nisaba verlag, 315-329.

Flick, U., von Kardorff, E. & Steinke, I. (2004) What is Qualitative Research? An Introduction to the Field. In: U. Flick, E. Von Kardoff & I. Steinke (eds.) *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 3-11.

Formenti, L. (2006) Raccontare e produrre cambiamenti, tra contesto e relazioni. In: L. Formenti (ed.) *Dare voce al cambiamento. La ricerca interroga la vita adulta*. Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 15-35.

Foucault, M. (1969) *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.

Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Goddard, C. & Wierzbicka, A. (1997) Discourse and Culture. In: T.A. Van Dijk (ed.) *Discourse as Social Interaction. Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (Vol. 2). London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 231-259.

Goffman, E. (1981) *Forms of talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.

González Monteagudo, J. (ed.) (2011). *Les histoires de vie en Espagne. Entre formation, identité et mémoire*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Grummell, B. & Finnegan, F. (2020) Introduction. Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education. In: B. Grummel & F. Finnegan (eds.) *Doing Critical and Creative Research in Adult Education. Case Studies in Methodology and Theory*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1-12.

Habermas, J. (1981) *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. Zweiter Band. Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.

Homer (1992) *The Odyssey* (T.E. Lawrence, Trans.). Ware: Wordsworth Classics.

Høyen, M. (2013) *An interdisciplinary eye on interdisciplinarity*. Paper presented at the ESREA Life History and Biography Research Network "Researching Learning Lives", Canterbury Christ Church University.

Luckmann, T. (1981) Lebenslauf und Sprache. In: J. Matthes, A. Pfeifenberger & M. Stosberg (eds.) *Biographie in handlungswissenschaftlicher Perspektive. Kolloquium am Sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschungszentrum der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg*. Nürnberg: Verlag der Nürnberger Forschungsvereinigung e.V., 55-66.

Mason, J. (1996) *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage.

Measor, L. & Woods, P. (1991) Breakthroughs and Blockages in Ethnographic Research: Contrasting Experiences During the *Changing Schools* Project. In: G. Walford (ed.) *Doing Educational Research*. London: Routledge, 59-81.

Merrill, B. & West, L. (2009) *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage.

Miller, G. (1997) Toward Ethnographies of Institutional Discourse: Proposals and Suggestions. In: G. Miller & R. Dingwall (eds.) *Context and Method in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, 155-171.

Mills, C.W. (2000) *The Sociological Imagination. (Afterword by Todd Gitlin)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mishler, E. (2006) Narrative and Identity: the double arrow of time. In: A. De Fina, D. Schiffrin & M. Bamberg (eds.) *Discourse and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 30-47.

Nias, J. (1991) Primary Teachers Talking: A Reflexive Account of Longitudinal Research. In: G. Walford (ed.) *Doing Educational Research*. London/New York: Routledge/The Open University, 147-165.

Ochs, E. (1979) Transcription as Theory. In: E. Ochs & B.B. Schieffelin (eds.) *Developmental Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 43-72.

Pavlenko, A. (2007) Autobiographic Narratives as Data in Applied Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(2), 163-188.

Sacks, H. (1992a) *Lectures in Conversation Vol. I*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Sacks, H. (1992b) *Lectures in Conversation Vol. II*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Sawyer, R.D. (2021) Dynamic Ecologies of Person and Place: Dialogic Ethnographies as Public Engagement. In: A. Bainbridge, L. Formenti & L. West (eds.) *Discourses, Dialogue and Diversity in Biographical Research*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 95-106.

Schiffrin, D. (1993) 'Speaking for another'. Sociolinguistic Interviews: Alignments, Identities and Frames. In: D. Tannen (ed.) *Framing in Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 231-263.

Schiffrin, D. (1996) Narrative as self-portrait: Sociolinguistic constructions of identity. *Language in Society*, 25, 167-203.

Schiffrin, D. (2006) *In Other Words. Variation in reference and narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schütze, F. (1981) Prozeßstrukturen des Lebenslaufs. In: J. Matthes, A. Pfeifenberger & M. Stosberg (eds.) *Biographie in handlungswissenschaftlicher Perspektive. Kolloquium am Sozialwissenschaftlichen Forschungszentrum der Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg*. Nürnberg: Verlag der Nürnberger Forschungsvereinigung e.V, 67-157.

Seale, C. (1998) Qualitative Interviewing. In: C. Seale (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*. London: Sage, 202-216.

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research. A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

Silverman, D. (ed.) (1997) *Qualitative Research. Theory, Method and Practice*. London: Sage.

Tannen, D. (2007) *Talking Voices. Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Research Interviewing. Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage.

West, L. (1996) *Beyond Fragments. Adults, Motivation and Higher Education. A Biographical Analysis*. London: Taylor & Francis.

West, L. (2024) Home from home: an auto/biographical narrative research pilgrimage. *Dyskursy Mlodych Andragogow/Adult Education Discourses* [online], 25, 133-152. Available at: https://doi.org/10.61824/dma.vi25.731.

Wierzbicka, A. (1991) *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics. The Semantics of Human Interaction*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.