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A Social Work Perspective on the Biographical Research Interview with Natalia

Abstract Biographical interviewing is used not only in research but also in clinical work such as social work practice. However, as social work settings differ from research settings, the ways of doing, analyzing, and using biographical interviews will differ. The differences arise from the reasons for and the purposes of the interview, the institutional context, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, interviewees' capacity for storytelling and reflective work, time limits, the structure of the biographical interview, and follow-up interviewing. In social work, interviewees are in a more vulnerable position than in research, and there is a stronger power imbalance. The service users' expectations are essential for the work, and it is important that the users articulate their expectations because the purpose of social work is to change and improve the life situation of service users. This asks for ethical considerations that are partly different from those necessary in research.

The biographical interview with Natalia is here analyzed using the strengths perspective as the social work theoretical framework. The analysis shows that in her present life Natalia has many strengths and resources, which, in a social work situation, could be mobilized to support her in getting more control over her life. Her perceived strengths are: her capacity for storytelling and reflection; her emotional and cognitive capacities; her willpower; and her capacity for enjoying her present life and planning for her future. Resources identified are: her significant others; her economic situation; her satisfying job situation; her capacity to have dreams for the future; and her religion. Implications for social work, both in the past and in the present, are discussed.

Keywords Social Work; Biography; Strengths; Interaction; Ethics; Interview

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Biography and Social Work

The purpose of this article is to analyze a given biographical research interview from a "social work perspective," and there are a number of possible approaches to that. My own perspective is grounded in lengthy experience of social work practice in health care and rehabilitation, as well as in theoretical stud-

ies on biographical methods carried out largely within the EU Leonardo INVITE project¹ (Björkenheim and Karvinen-Niinikoski 2009a; Björkenheim and Karvinen-Niinikoski 2009b; Björkenheim, Levälähti, Karvinen-Niinikoski 2009) and subsequently (e.g., Björkenheim 2010). These experiences lead me to believe that biographical methods do have a place in social work practice, at least in certain contexts and with certain service users.

In addition to analyzing the empirical interview data, it is necessary to discuss some general differences between research and social work practice as settings for biographical interviewing. Biographical researchers have found that "unhampered autobiographical storytelling is basic biographical work" (Schütze 2009:23) and that it can have healing effects (Rosenthal 2003). However, some researchers have questioned the use of biographical methods for "informal therapy as a by-product" (Richard 2004:171) and the claims for empowerment through biographical research (Bornat and Walmsley 2004). In my view, practice and research are essentially different as settings for biographical interviewing, and this implies different considerations in the use of biographical interviewing (Schütze 2009). One of the main characteristics of social work practice is that it generally aims at change and improvement in the lives of the service users,² whereas the aim of qual-

¹ The project EU Leonardo INVITE 2003-2006 developed a curriculum for teaching "biographical counseling" to professionals working in vocational rehabilitation (*European Studies on Inequalities and Social Cohesion 1-2/2008 and 3-4/2008*). The participating universities were those of Magdeburg in Germany, Helsinki in Finland, Wales/Bangor in UK, and Lodz in Poland. Practice institutions in these countries, and in Austria and Italy participated as well.

² The definition of social work last adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) states: "[t]he social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human

itative interviews for research – except for different types of action research – is generally not primarily to bring about change in an interviewee's situation.

Biographical interviewing may be used not only in social casework but also, for instance, in psychotherapy (Hornung 2010). It is important to note that, whilst social work practitioners may use biographical approaches and their work will often have therapeutic elements, social work is not psychotherapy. Psychotherapists generally focus exclusively on psychological and relationship issues, whereas social workers will typically be involved in practical matters as well (Wilson et al. 2011:347).

In many respects, the interview with Natalia resembles interviews I used to carry out as a social worker with service users in a rehab unit, where an inter-professional rehabilitation team assessed users' employment capacity and opportunities for rehabilitative interventions, and in collaboration with the users made plans for their future. A main difference here, of course, is that Natalia is not presenting the interviewer with any explicit problem she needs help with, particularly not a problem related to her work or employment capacity. But, the question remains: If Natalia was telling her story to a social worker, how might the worker listen and react? In what way would that be different from a researcher's way of listening and reacting?

In my analysis of the transcribed interview with Natalia I have focused on two aspects: first, the

relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (IFSW 2012).

interaction between interviewer and interviewee, including Natalia's possible motives for wanting to participate in the interview, and second, Natalia's story analyzed using a strengths perspective (Saleebey 1997) as the theoretical framework. In the conclusion, I discuss possible implications of Natalia's story for social work practice.

Social work intervening "at the points where people interact with their environments" (IFSW 2012) implies that social work is context-bound. My own context is Finland, a Northern country of 5 million people, where a welfare system was built up after World War II. During the past twenty years welfare services have been cut, resulting in growing socio-economic differences. The education required for qualified social workers in Finland is a Master's degree in social work, comprising five years of university studies. Most social workers in Finland are employed in the public welfare services, mostly in social services but also in public health care and in state schools.

There are some obvious risks in applying a social work perspective to a biographical interview performed in another national context. However, I believe that there are common features in the ways social workers, at least in Western countries, relate to their profession and to service users, and an outside perspective may, at best, generate some new thoughts on the subject.

Before going into the analysis of the interview, I will make some reflections on the differences between social work practice and research in regards to biographical interviewing.

How Do Social Work Interviews Differ from Research Interviews?

As mentioned before, I find it necessary to distinguish clearly between social work practice and research as settings for biographical interviewing. Comparing the two settings, at least seven main differences are identified:

First: The reason for and the purpose of the interview. In social work, the reason for an interview is usually the service user's problematic situation, and the purpose is to enable the service user to get some help with his or her situation and achieve change. In a research interview, the research itself is usually the reason for the interview, and the purpose is for the researcher to get a "good interview," for instance, good research data; the purpose is not to create change in the particular interviewee's life situation.

Second: The institutional context. Social workers generally work in institutions (public or private) which set the terms for what services they can offer to service users, and how. The institutional context probably also restricts the narrator's free storytelling in different ways, especially if the social worker can influence the provision of services (Schütze 2009). Researchers do not typically offer any services and the institutional frames are different, even if not necessarily less strict.

Third: The relationship between interviewer and interviewee. In social work practice, the interviewer is a professional who is educated to work with service users on improving their life situation. Service users usually see a social worker because they have

a problem. They are therefore generally in a more vulnerable position than research interviewees. They have to make their situation understood and convince the social worker of their needs. The social worker generally represents a public authority with power to influence the provision of services, which implies a considerable power imbalance in the relationship. In biographical research, the interviewing relationship is different, even though there is usually a power imbalance there, too (Kazmierska 2004). Research interviewees generally volunteer to be interviewed and, as a rule, are not dependent on the interviewer for any service they need. On the other hand, the relationship between researcher/interviewer and research subject/narrator may be more difficult in the sense that it is more unclear. The researcher becomes a character in the story of the research subject and thus changes it (Shaw 2008).

In biographical interviewing, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is different from many other interviewing relationships also due to factors such as time and confidence required. Sometimes, this particular constellation may raise expectations of help that the interviewer, whether social worker or researcher, is not capable of meeting, especially when it comes to handling early traumatic experiences. On the other hand, professional social workers may be better equipped to deal with such expectations and have better knowledge of available services than do researchers.

Fourth: The interviewee's capacity for storytelling. Persons with little capacity for storytelling would hardly in this regard would hardly volunteer for a biographical research interview but they might well

be service users in social work. Biographical narrative interviewing is therefore not always possible in social work.

Fifth: Time limits. In a social work situation, there are generally quite strict time limits both for the interview and for the work to be done before and after the interview. A biographical researcher supposedly has more time to plan, perform, and analyze his or her interviews. The biographical research interview with Natalia took three hours. In the rehab unit, the social worker usually has two hours for an assessment interview including a dialogue on the user's expectations and on available rehabilitation services. In most other social work settings, there is not that much time available for one interview.

Sixth: The structure of the biographical interview. In research, an autobiographical narrative interview is generally as open as possible (Schütze 2009). Because of the specific characteristics of the social work setting, biographical interviews often have to be more structured along certain themes and include more verbal dialogue. There is also more direct questioning about facts, and certain issues have to be discussed, either they are brought up by the service user or not.

Seventh: Follow-up with the interviewee. In research, there is hardly much follow-up with interviewees for the sake of the interviewee as a person. In social work, a biographical interview used for assessment is often just the beginning of the work. This means that, if necessary, there will be opportunities later to deal with strong emotions and issues provoked by the narrator's biographical work.

The characteristics of social work practice have certain ethical implications. A social worker must consider for what purpose a service user is asked to tell his or her life story. And how will the story be interpreted and used? And by whom? How will the life-story telling contribute to the improvement of the user's life situation? In research, there is no obligation to improve the situation of the interviewee; ethical principles just state that you should avoid doing harm. Since life events and the autobiographical story are essentially meaningful only in the life of the narrator/service user, in social work, the user's own interpretation of the story should be given priority (Barker 2009). In research, life stories are interpreted mainly by the researcher.

In research, interviewees will be asked for informed consent. Service users of social work should also be asked, in one way or another, for (oral) consent to tell their life story (instead of just answering questions about biographical facts), and they should also be given the opportunity to refuse. The question of informed consent to life-story telling seems particularly crucial in settings where social work, in addition to a supportive role, also has a function of control, such as in child protection and social assistance services. The best way to inform a service user of the purpose and possible consequences of a biographical narrative interview has to be determined in each specific case. This difficulty is being discussed in qualitative research, too (Shaw 2008).

An important outcome of biographical interviews, intended or unintended and regardless of setting, is the biographical work done by the narrator (Rosenthal 2003; Schütze 2009). This can be quite hard

work and evoke strong emotions, as is evidently the case in the interview with Natalia. Persons seeking therapy are generally prepared in advance to work psychologically with their self and their life. Service users in social work (nor research interviewees) seldom know in advance what hard (biographical) work may be involved in a biographical interview. Should they, in some way, be told about this probable outcome of the interview in connection with being asked to consent to a biographical interview?

In biographical interviewing, where a lot of details are revealed, strict confidentiality is, of course, indispensable. Social workers need to consider how much of a users' biographical information actually has to be documented in the files. Confidentiality is obvious in supervision situations, but what about "informal" supervision between colleagues? Confidentiality is required in research as well, but is handled in partly different ways.

Interaction between Interviewer and Interviewee

Just as the interaction between interviewer and interviewee in research is seen to be an essential element in retrieving good interview data (Lillrank 2012), in most social work theory, the interaction and a trusting relationship between social worker and service user are considered essential elements in the helping process (Payne 2005; Wilson et al. 2012). In social work, the relationship can even be "the end in itself," not only a "means to an end" (Network for Psycho-Social Policy and Practice 2002 as cited in Wilson et al. 2011:9). That, of course, echoes the claims of classic "Rogerian" person-centered counseling, which has

been identified as having a particular affinity with the techniques and methodology of the biographical research interviewer (Barker 2009).

In the interview with Natalia, the interviewer very soon manages to build trust in the relationship and shows Natalia that she is actively and attentively listening to her story. As a result, Natalia very soon opens up about her traumatic childhood experiences. The interviewer gives short empathic comments to Natalia's emotionally strenuous story, but seems somewhat unprepared for, almost embarrassed at, the strong emotions evoked in Natalia recalling her life before entering the children's home at the age of 15. The interviewer interrupts Natalia at several points, trying to make her talk more about the time she spent in the children's home (which is the topic of the research).

In social work, too, for various reasons, the interviewer sometimes has to interrupt the narrator's storytelling and try to direct the interview towards issues seemingly more relevant to the purpose of the meeting. This is why social workers have to carefully consider when, why, and how biographical interviewing is proposed and introduced to a service user. In social work interviewing, strong emotions are not rare taken that service users often are in a difficult life situation and/or have traumatic experiences. If a user seems to need psychological services, the worker can discuss this with the person and explore the possibilities for such services. Social workers themselves should ideally, after critical interviews, have the opportunity to receive supervision or – at least – some kind of debriefing. Biographical research interviewers may not always

have this opportunity. The emotional labor research interviewers may endure is receiving increasing attention (Lillrank 2012).

Natalia's trusting relationship with the interviewer encourages her to talk more and more, almost as if her story had been there long before the interview, just waiting to be told. But, is it the story the researcher wants to hear? How does Natalia feel after the interview? These questions call for some reflections on Natalia's possible motives for wanting to be interviewed.

In the presentation of the interview with Natalia, we are told that she volunteered for the interview because "she wanted to demonstrate the fate of a person brought up in a children's home" (p. 116 in this issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review*). One can ponder on her possible deeper motives. Natalia may have had other, unarticulated, not even conscious, motives and expectations when volunteering to participate in the research interview.

In a social work situation, it would be natural to ask the service user directly about her motives and expectations. In this instance, however, we can only venture some guesses. At several instances, Natalia points out how lucky she was to be placed in a good children's home. Perhaps, by volunteering for the interview, she wanted to show her gratitude to those who made this possible, to repay, in some way, for having been "saved" to experience a "normal" adulthood? Natalia is emotionally very moved when she talks about her family of origin. Even if talking about her childhood is extremely strenuous, the telling seems to be very important for her. To

whom is she telling her story? Is she, perhaps, telling it to herself in order to better understand who she is and what actually happened to her and her family? Natalia expresses feelings of guilt for having been more fortunate than her siblings and shows grief and worry for them. Is she, perhaps, telling her story to someone who could confirm to her that she has done everything possible to help her sisters and brothers, and that she needs not feel any guilt?

Natalia tells the interviewer that she now has a good and “normal” life – that she is happy with her husband and her 13-year-old daughter. However, she is not able to fully enjoy her present life because of her worries about her relatives. Did Natalia, perhaps, volunteer for the interview hoping that somehow someone would give her the permission to finally enjoy her own life and take care of herself? Natalia talks in detail of her present worries about her relatives – she takes care of her mother, grandmother, and nieces and tries to help her siblings in any way she can think of. Is Natalia, perhaps, telling her story hoping to receive some practical advice to help her in her everyday life? A social worker could have confirmed Natalia’s right to take care of herself and helped her to find out what services, if any, might be available to ease her daily burden.

A Strengths Perspective on Natalia’s Story

The biographical interview with Natalia would enable a social work interviewer to get a better understanding of her past and present situation. However, in social work, understanding is seldom enough. Showing up in a rehab unit, for instance, Natalia would expect to receive some counseling and practi-

cal advice to help her deal with her vocational problem (if she had one). However, the biographical interview could well be the part of an assessment forming the base for making a rehabilitation plan for her.

Even though social workers sometimes work according to a selected theory, they have been found mostly to use theory in an eclectic way (Payne 2005). Any of the following theories would probably work fairly well with biographical interviewing: the psychodynamic theory, the postmodern (narrative) theory, the relationship-based theory, the humanistic theory, or the strengths perspective. For my analysis of the interview, I have chosen the strengths perspective, which has been fairly commonly used (in a selected or eclectic way) in social work practice in Finland. Dennis Saleebey, one of the main theoretical developers of the strengths perspective, makes a connection between strengths and narrative as follows: “one of the genuine strengths of people(s) lies in the fabric of narrative and story in the culture and in the family” (1997:243). The critique against the strengths perspective focuses on the risk of too much stressing self-help and self-responsibility and underestimating structural inequalities (Gray 2011). However, Saleebey sees the strengths perspective as “the work of helping clients and communities build something of lasting value from the materials and capital within and around them” (1997:233), not as denying individual and structural problems.

Even though the focus in the strengths perspective is mainly on the strengths of the service user, the guidelines suggest that at the beginning of an assessment, a brief summary of the identified problem situation be made and agreed upon (Cowger and

Snively 2002). In social work, dialogue is essential, and the difficulty here is that my analysis of the interview can only be based on the transcript without any chance of further interaction with Natalia. Therefore, I present Natalia’s problem situation as a summary of what appears to me to be her own understanding of her life and present life situation: Natalia has survived a hard life and is now able to live what she considers a “normal” life. Her survival is due partly to good luck but also to her own will and efforts. She feels guilt for her brothers and sisters not having been as lucky as she has been. All her five siblings have had, and still have, unstable lives being, or have been, involved in criminal acts and/or drug abuse accompanied by unemployment and economic misery. However, Natalia wants to think that the bad luck and unhappy fate of her siblings is not her fault. She wants to believe that she has done everything possible to help her siblings. She also implies that, possibly, her siblings could themselves have made a little more effort to get a better life. She does not judge her parents but tries to understand their situation. In addition to individual reasons, she also sees structural reasons for her family’s misery. Natalia has seen it as her responsibility to be the strong one and to take care of the other family members, and they, in turn, seem to have expected this from her. In this task, her suicide attempt at the age of 14 appears to her a big failure, an expression of her weakness. In her present situation, Natalia still feels responsible for her siblings and tries to help them and their children. However, some ambiguity can be sensed in her story: How much must she still sacrifice of her time and energy to help her relatives, and how much can she allow herself to enjoy her own life and devote her time on her own little family? Natalia

gives the impression that she is quite exhausted (she says that she is “worn out” [p. 155, line 17]), and she seems to long for a break in her continuous responsibility, worry, and grief over her relatives.

A social worker listening to Natalia’s story from a strengths perspective would try to identify personal strengths and external resources that could be supported and mobilized to help Natalia to get more control of her life. In a real social work situation, the assessment would be done in verbal dialogue with the service user. In the transcription of the interview with Natalia at least five essential strengths stand out:

First, Natalia is capable of telling her story and of reflecting on her past, on past events, on persons in her childhood, and on herself as a child and as an adult. This means that she is capable of doing biographical work, a prerequisite for a person to actively make changes in her life.

Second, Natalia’s emotional capacities seem to be strong and multidimensional; in spite of her very difficult childhood, she is able to appreciate positive things as well. She is not too embittered, but is able to forgive and still love her parents. She is able to feel grief and compassion for her brothers and sisters, and still takes responsibility for all her close relatives. She is also emotionally capable of maintaining a relationship with a partner and of mothering a child.

Third, Natalia has considerable cognitive capacities: she has wanted to study and learn new things; she has studied in several schools, and even taken a uni-

versity exam (Bachelors).

Fourth, Natalia has strong willpower and has made several important decisions in her life. One of her biggest decisions was after her suicide attempt, when she decided she wanted to go to a children's home instead of going home, even if that meant breaking with her family. On the other hand, the fact that the family turned their back on her may have enabled her to free herself from them and see herself as a separate person, someone who has to take responsibility for her own life.

Fifth, in spite of all her misfortunes, her unhappy childhood, grief, and worries, Natalia has the capacity to enjoy life and plan for her future. She has built herself a new life with a family of her own.

All these capacities of Natalia are essential strengths which a social worker could try to reinforce and draw upon to support Natalia to gain more control over her present life. In spite of the difficult circumstances during her childhood, Natalia also had some external resources to draw on. There seems to have been a few people who were crucial in leading her life in a more positive direction. There was her grandmother, who intervened at some critical moments, as when the children set a fire in the home. There was the school psychologist, who helped Natalia to get into the children's home, and there were the carers at the children's home, who showed her what a "normal" life and "normal" relationships can be.

In her present life, Natalia also has some external resources to draw upon. Her resource persons are, of course, her husband and daughter and her friends

but also her mother, who now serves as a resource to Natalia's daughter. Natalia's economic situation appears to be sound. She has had a fairly good career and likes her present job. The family has a plot for recreation and has been able to make some vacation trips. The family also has dreams for the future, such as building a house of their own. A resource for Natalia is definitely her religion, even though she seldom goes to church. In a social work situation, the worker would also be a resource to the service user, someone with whom to talk and discuss opportunities for help and support.

In a strengths-based social work assessment of Natalia's present situation, the biographical interview would be analyzed as a joint activity, and there would be a mutual agreement on the assessment as a base for planning further intervention. In future meetings, Natalia's strengths and resources could be further explored and supported, aiming at helping her to gain more control over her life situation.

To Conclude

As discussed above, there are both similarities and differences between research and social work practice as settings for biographical interviewing. The relationship and interaction between interviewer and interviewee are crucial in both settings, and many necessary ethical considerations are the same. The main differences pertain to the purpose of the interview, the institutional context, the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, narrators' capacity for storytelling, time limits, the structure of the interview, and the follow-up. In social work, the focus is on the service user's wellbe-

ing, whereas in research, the focus is on the story itself and its content (the research data). In social casework, the interviewee is generally more vulnerable than in research.

The biographical interview with Natalia raises reflections on possible implications for social work interventions. Could social services have done more to help Natalia and her siblings during their childhood? Societal, judicial, and cultural differences, of course, make it difficult for a foreigner to judge this. Moreover, even with strict laws and good protective intentions, child protection is an extremely demanding field of social work. In retrospect, one might argue that child protection authorities probably should have intervened earlier in Natalia's family, as the children were badly neglected long before they were taken into care. But then, we do not actually know exactly how and to what extent family services had already been involved. Health care should probably have also been involved earlier, thus, maybe, saving the 2-year-old sister who died, due to lack of adequate health care, in front of her siblings who had been left alone at home. Natalia states that she made her suicide attempt because she did not know to whom to turn in despair, and perhaps social services would ideally have served as a secure haven for the children to turn to in times of extreme confusion and danger.

When the children finally were taken into care, they were placed in different children's homes. Why they could not be placed together in the same home remains unclear. Maybe it was just practically impossible to let them stay together, even if it appears rather cruel to separate them at such a critical mo-

ment. We do not know how much the school was involved in the case, but there evidently was some kind of involvement since the school psychologist intervened after Natalia's suicide attempt.

From a social work perspective, Natalia, in her present life, might benefit from social work support in finding out how she wants to live her life and how she can manage it without feeling that she is neglecting her relatives. Doing what is "right" seems very important to her. The possibility of getting any kind of help from her siblings or receiving help from social services in the care of the mother and grandmother could be discussed with Natalia. It seems that the child protection services and the counseling, drug clinic, and/or vocational services offered to the siblings of Natalia so far have proved rather fruitless. With her consent and that of her siblings perhaps Natalia's social worker could collaborate with their social workers to work jointly on the complex family situation. Finally, it seems that Natalia herself might benefit from some kind of psychotherapy or from further counseling with a social worker. Natalia does not mention so far having undergone any psychotherapy.

The biographical interview with Natalia seems to lend itself quite easily to an analysis from a social work perspective. Maybe one reason for this is that Natalia has actually been a client of social services and that stories of a traumatic childhood, like hers, are not rare in social work practice. Unlike many storytellers in social work, however, Natalia is extremely reflective and articulate, so that, even without the possibility of further dialogue with her, the reader of the transcribed interview gets a fair-

ly good picture of her earlier life, as well as of her present situation. A strengths-based analysis of the interview shows that Natalia has many strengths and resources. This is, of course, largely due to Natalia's fairly stable life situation at the time of the interview. The life stories of actual service users in social work can be much darker and more chaotic with possible strengths less visible. It would be interesting to read biographical interviews with Natalia's siblings as well, if that was feasible. They would probably be very different.

As mentioned earlier, this analysis of the interview with Natalia was made in a different social and cultural context than the one where the interview was done and the interviewee's life lived. This has, of course, influenced the analysis in certain ways. However, I think that one of the strengths of qualitative research is that there can be several perspectives on one phenomenon. Actually, it would be interesting to have social workers from different

countries and contexts analyze the same interview and compare the results. Such a comparative study could give a broad spectrum of perspectives on social work practice and underlying academic theory in different countries.

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