

Piotr Filipkowski 

Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek 

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences

From a Case to a Case Study—And Back, or on the Search for Everyman in Biographical Research¹

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Abstract Sociological, qualitative, biographical research is distinguished by its interest in *the case*. At the same time, this research seeks—often through *case studies*—to understand or explain supraindividual, repetitive phenomena which are, to some extent, general. In this article, we look at how cases are treated in biographical sociology. We present our own empirical experience, consisting in autobiographical narrative interviews with participants of a nationwide panel survey, who were randomly drawn to the panel many years ago. We show the possible consequences, both methodological and theoretical, of this way of selecting cases, quite unusual for biographical sociology. We wonder whether and to what extent the experience of the “ordinary person,” the *Everyman*, can be reflected in sociological works based on the biographical method.

Keywords case, case study, biographical sociology, autobiographical narrative interview, case selection methods, sampling, Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN)

Piotr Filipkowski, sociologist, oral historian, researcher at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Author of monography *Oral History and the War. The Nazi Concentration Camp Experience in a Biographical-Narrative Perspective* (Wrocław 2010, Berlin 2019). He has currently published mainly on qualitative research methods and oral history theory and practice.

Contact details:

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences

Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warszawa

email: pfilipkowski@ifispan.waw.pl

Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek is a Research and Archiving Specialist at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. She has been a member of the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN) research team since 2012. Her research interests include methodology of social sciences, social data archiving, biographical perspective in sociology, and life-course studies.

Contact details:

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences

Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warszawa

email: dzyczynska-ciolek@ifispan.waw.pl

Introduction: Case Study and the Biographical Method in Sociology

Qualitative sociology, and biographical sociology in particular, is distinguished by its interest in cases to such a great extent that the analysis of cases—one or several—is even sometimes considered to be identical with the qualitative method (Ragin 1992, Starman 2013). Let us add right away, that in sociology—and probably in each of its main paradigmatic variations—the case is most often understood in only one of its two main meanings.² The idea does not consist in studying things that are random, unplanned, unusual, unforeseen, incidental, surprising, and not fitting to the ordinary course of things, which is how this can be understood in everyday language. In sociology, the opposite tends to be true: the idea is to study things that happen in the ordinary course of life and which are, in some way, typical or characteristic and, in any case, have their own social causes and background. Thus, a sociological case usually represents or exemplifies *something* larger, broader, more general, more abstract, and, as such, more important or even primary for sociology. The English *case* or the German *Fall* refer to the (assumed) order of the social world rather than to its (perhaps sensed) chaos. This is not surprising: after all, and despite all reservations, sociology, includ-

ing qualitative sociology, is, or tries to be, a scientific endeavour, introducing at least cognitive order into the world. Sociology does that usually by speaking of “social phenomena,” that is, ones that are, in a way, supra-individual, repetitive, and general. The proposal to focus full attention on studying the case “for itself” (Stake 2015) is somehow not widely applied in sociology.

Sociological, qualitative, biographical studies are perhaps the best and certainly a very clear example of how to build a transition from individual to general through *case studies*. It is enough to review the texts from the last few issues of the *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* or *Qualitative Sociology Review* to develop an opinion. Even the titles of some articles leave no room for doubt: “Middle Class in Biographical Perspective. Empirical Case Study” (Burski 2016), “Biographical Experience of Living in Two Cultures. Biographical Case Study” (Wygnańska 2016), “Biographical Meanings of Work: The Case of a Polish Freelancer” (Haratyk, Białystok, Gońda 2017), “A Situation, a Narrative, and a Life History. The Case of Natalia” (Riemann 2014), “Autobiographical Accounts of War Experiences. An Outline for the Analysis of Topically Focused Autobiographical Texts – Using the Example of the ‘Robert Rasmus’ Account in Studs Terkel’s Book ‘The Good War’” (Schütze 2014). Although it is definitely worth going beyond the titles to see how many texts in qualitative biographical sociology turn the specific analyzed biographies into *cases, examples, types, or patterns* of something larger and more general, going somewhere beyond themselves. This can be explained by the popularity of the German school of biographical research in this field, as it did not only

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² Here we refer to the ambiguity of the Polish word “accident” – which is lost in English, because for each of the two meanings we have separate words (accident or chance vs. case). The German language is closer to Polish here: Zufall/ Fall). See also: Bodanko 2012.

offer (and still offers) numerous examples of the use of *Fallanalyse*, but also developed its contemporary methodological and theoretical foundations. Drawing deeper into the history of biographical methods in sociology, we will reach such classic texts as *Jack Roller. A delinquent boy's own story* (Shaw 1930), *Życiorys własny robotnika [A worker's own biography]* (Wojciechowski 1930), or *Life-record of an emigrant*, that is, Władek Wiśniewski's extensive diary written at the request of researchers, which, after being abridged and edited, became the main text in the third volume of the monumental work *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918–1920). The last three examples, dating back to almost a century ago, are more of a *biographical case* for study than sociological *case studies* in today's understanding. One reason (but not the only one) is the proportion between the autobiographical source text and the analytical text, pushed aside and present in introductions, closings and footnotes. Undoubtedly, however, the point here is not only about some interesting individual life stories of those particular people whose diaries we can read (as a literary genre, these should be rather seen as memoirs). Thomas and Znaniecki clearly show this in their introduction to Władek's diary (and also to the third volume of *The Polish Peasant...*), where they repeatedly talk about typology, generalization, objectivity, and science of this analysis, while simultaneously recognizing the complex biographical materials as the most perfect kind of data for a sociologist (*The Polish Peasant...Vol. III, pp. 5–88*). As we know, analytical induction would be the right way to proceed in research hereto guarantee clarity and certainty of the transition from a case to *something* larger represented by the case and contained in the individual

actualization. Therefore, it seems that (qualitative) sociology has been successfully studying biographical cases for a hundred years and offering case studies that are convincing, at least for itself.

Let us return for a moment to the case in the first, more common and elementary meaning (i.e., accident, chance), which usually escapes sociology, but does not disappear from the real world. A case/accident is something that happens in the world: randomly, unexpectedly, and even surprisingly, but quite commonly. It is an event like any other: it has its own flow, its own causes and effects, and often its own perpetrators and victims. Uniqueness consists usually in the fact that it surprises us by not matching the repetitive rhythm, the familiar order of things, the fixed structure, or a recognized process. Or, to put it more simply and more straightforwardly, it destabilises our lives. Anyone who has conducted biographical research or analyzed interviews within the framework of such research is probably aware of the complexity of the "data" gathered as a result: not only the diversity of genres in narrative forms, but also the heterogeneity of facts. It is not only about the obvious diversity of the events being narrated, but also their biographical weight, so to speak, about their causality and influence on further life, which are revealed only through the perspective of "comprehensive" narrative retrospection. This is when we can see long-term biographical processes (or "process structures"), as well as unexpected events disturbing their rhythm, which sometimes turn out to be life turning points, dividing life into distinctly different stages. Sociological studies of biographical cases, which are to refer to wider social pro-

cesses, describe unique constellations of life accidents themselves.

As can already be seen from this introduction, we are interested in a two-way methodological and theoretical reflection on the *cases* analyzed by biographically-oriented, qualitative sociologists. Firstly, we are interested in the bigger phenomena exemplified by the analyzed biographies and, secondly, in what they consist of or what their building material is. The third question concerns the rhetoric of sociological works based on the biographical method: what do we aim to say by our biographical cases? What do they, in the narrative sense, “do” or what are they “expected to do”? (Ragin, Becker 1992). Similar questions have recently been asked of all sociological case studies (Dumez 2015). We narrow them down to biographical research, where the analyzed case involves, at least initially, someone’s life and an autobiographical narrative about it. We focus on this particular person who told us her or his biography and who, usually under a changed name and with other personal characteristics modified, is introduced to the readers of our texts. The change of name is noteworthy in this context. Justified usually, especially recently, by the need to protect our respondents (their personal data), interlocutors or subjects, carried out in the mode of an almost typographical correction, it entails a significant epistemological shift. At the cost of violating the factual uniqueness and cohesion (and thus weakening the value of these narratives as historical sources: hence the significant dispute over anonymization in oral history), a decisive step towards the crystallization of the “biographical case” is being made here. We get the impression that this step is insufficiently rec-

ognized by biographical researchers. It is appropriate to quote a recent statement by Kaja Kaźmierska, who reflects on it:

We researchers usually work on transcripts that are anonymized according to the promise we make to storytellers. Their narrations, though based on the personal story, become texts of culture, analytical cases showing typical relations between biographical and social processes and phenomena. The analysis of a single case aims at treating a person’s life story as illustrative of general types (particularly in case studies using the biographical approach) (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 8). Anonymization has a dual meaning here: on the one hand, it protects the narrator from being recognized; on the other hand, it symbolically deprives that narrator of authorship when the narrative becomes a *case*. (Kaźmierska 2018: 401)

This fragment forces readers to reflect once again on the personal “naturalness” of the biographical cases that we subject to sociological analysis. They cease to be as obvious and problem-free as they might have seemed before the study, perhaps even during the interviews. Further steps in sociological “scientification” necessarily lead to the de-subjectification of the collected “material.” The subjective (self-) knowledge of the narrators becomes the sociological knowledge of objects: first, the knowledge about them, and then about the social processes that their narratives represent or exemplify. The recognition that the narratives efficiently co-create them does not make much difference: they remain cases within these processes, and are typical rather than untypical or “deviant” (cf. Orum 2015).

Literature devoted to the sociological, biographical method provides many examples of work with biographical cases. Very often, these are single cases, as in classic texts by Fritz Schütze or Gabriela Rosenthal. In their methodological and theoretical fragments, authors present various ways of their analysis: most commonly encouraging or even postulating the inclusion of many cases within a single study, which aims at generalization and building a (grounded) theory. There is no need to discuss or even summarise these proposals here. We only delineate the field of methodological and theoretical reflection, assuming that it is well-known to sociologists and biographical researchers, and we take a step back, asking where the biographical cases in these studies come from. We ask what would change, theoretically and methodologically, if these cases had come from elsewhere. When looking for answers, we refer to our own research experience.

Interviews with Respondents of the POLPAN Survey: Outline of the Project

In recent years, we have participated in a project carried out at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, which consisted in recording several dozen biographical interviews with selected respondents of the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN).³ POLPAN is a questionnaire-based quantitative survey of the social structure. Although the authors and those who imple-

ment the POLPAN project refer to the notion of “individual biographies,” this notion has a completely different meaning and tonality than in comparison with qualitative biographical sociology. POLPAN is a panel survey, which means that the same people have participated in it regularly from time to time (in this case: once every five years) since the start of the study, that is, since late 1987 and early 1988 (with new groups of young people being added over the years). In order to carry out biographical interviews, respondents born in 1922–1942 were selected. Those respondents had previously participated in each wave of the survey, that is, six times.⁴ Within this group, we tried to conduct interviews with people from possibly varied backgrounds (with different educational backgrounds and occupations, living in towns of different sizes, scattered all over Poland).

The aim of the project was: “(1) at the most general level – to strengthen the biographical dimension of POLPAN by not only returning to the same respondents (which is the essence of panel research), but also by changing the cognitive perspective: from a questionnaire-based one (“questioning”) to a narrative one (“listening”), (2) to extend and supplement the knowledge obtained by means of the questionnaire-based method, as well as to check whether the interviews enable a better interpretation of this knowledge, (3) to acquire a new type of sociological knowledge about the studied individu-

³ Between 2014 and 2016, a total of 44 interviews were recorded and are available from the Qualitative Data Archive of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences (www.adj.ifispan.pl). More information about the POLPAN survey can be found at: www.polpan.org.

⁴ The selection of the oldest age group stemmed from practical considerations connected with the POLPAN study. The choice of respondents who participated in all waves of the survey (without interruptions) stemmed from the intention to compare the questionnaire data with the material from biographical interviews.

als, based on their subjective perspective, on a comprehensive, retrospective vision of their own lives expressed in a free-flowing autobiographical story” (Andrejuk, Życzyńska-Ciołek, Filipkowski 2015: 1). Thus, the aim of the “biographical project” was not to experiment with ways of selecting cases. However, a question may be asked: did the fact that the interviews were conducted with these particular people and not with others just because they were randomly drawn to the sample many years ago⁵ have any significance for the flow and outcome of the study? Did this fact influence the quality and type of material obtained? Could it be relevant to methodological and theoretical conclusions?

Case Selection in the Autobiographical Narrative Interview Method by F. Schütze

The question of how to select cases for any study can be answered only after its objective has been formulated, or at least after determining the subject-matter of the study. We tried to conduct interviews with respondents of the POLPAN survey on the basis of the autobiographical narrative interview method (Schütze 1983). Pointing out to the possible (and, at the same time correct, appropriate) ways of applying his autobiographical narrative interview method, Fritz Schütze writes:

This interview format is sensible, if the researcher focuses on biographical processes of special relevancy

⁵ Of course, it cannot be said that the group of the oldest respondents to the POLPAN survey, from which the first persons were selected for biographical interviews in 2014, still constituted a random sample after several decades of the survey. It is true, however, that these persons would not have participated in the POLPAN survey if they had not been included in the random sample in 1987.

for the study of interesting social worlds (e.g., professional social worlds as those of social work or psychological counselling), on problems of the life course (as to what would be the impact of a severe chronic illness on the life course of an afflicted person) and/or on social problems (e.g., being long-term unemployed because of a severe chronic illness, being in a process of occupational self-alienation and of losing one’s work position, etc.), or on collective social processes in which biographical experiences and dynamics of identity development or impeding factors are prominent (e.g., social movements). (Schütze nd.: 2)

Thus, we can see that the autobiographical narrative interview method can be a tool for micro-scale analysis (such as the analysis of a biography of a person struggling with a serious chronic disease), as well as for the analysis of complex social phenomena and processes at the meso or macro level (such as social movements). In the former situation, it is possible (and sometimes this is the only sensible approach) to conduct an interview with only one person (in the same work, Schütze refers to the example of a professional counsellor, who “would just like to deepen the counselling process of her or his singular client through an analysis of her or his individual life history on the empirical base of an autobiographical narrative interview” [Schütze nd.: 4]). In the latter situation, it is necessary to conduct and analyze more than one interview in order to implement subsequent analytical steps and build a suitable theoretical model (or models). We will look at the latter situation in more detail, firstly because it is more common in the practice of sociological research and, secondly, because of the opinion of the author of the autobiographical narrative interview method:

[W]hereas it is possible to develop new theoretical ideas, notions, and hypotheses on the empirical basis of single cases, and, in turn, to apply established theoretical concepts and models in use to single cases, it is not possible to construct new systematic and integrated theoretical models of qualitative sociology on the empirical ground of just one single case. (Schütze 2014: 268)

Schütze recommends that the researcher should select successive interviews for analysis on the basis of analytical abstraction and contrastive comparison of at least two interviews. The process of contrasting case studies should be continued in parallel to the construction of the theoretical model(s). The inclusion of subsequent cases is therefore pursued through theoretical sampling, and—as in grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss 1973)—it should result in achieving theoretical saturation:

[The researcher] starts to imagine possible variations of case developments in terms of biographical and/or social processes and search for them in the empirical field under study. This will possibly lead to contacts with new informants and to conducting new autobiographical narrative interviews. In an ideal research process, this would end up with the complete theoretical saturation of the selection process regarding new cases to be collected and studied. In such an ideal state of research any additional approach to a new case wouldn't generate new theoretical insights anymore. (Schütze nd: 47)

However, a question arises here: How and where should the researcher look for cases that she or he would like to explore? How does one find people to

start the study with? How to find subsequent individuals who would fit into the “research sample” for theoretical reasons? On what grounds can one claim that a biography is (or, rather, will become, as a result of the analysis) a contrasting case to some other, already known, currently analyzed biography?

Schütze writes about the selection of interlocutors as follows:

One must [...] take into account that the usual ways connected to standard types of interviewing as to how and where to get informants are not an option. Prospective informants of autobiographical narrative interviews cannot be picked from the files of the local residents' registration office by a random generator. One reason for this is, that the number of informants in a study through autobiographical narrative interviews must be extremely reduced compared with the number of informants in statistically representative random surveys, since the material produced in such an interview, the autobiographical narrative rendering, is so complex and must be studied as a uniquely shaped single case taking into account both form and content of the autobiographical narrative and the evolvement of personal identity expressed by it. Another reason for the non-viability of a random selection of interviewees is that prospective informants must be selected and contracted by criteria of certain biographical (and therefore quite personal or even quite unique) features one cannot make out in official social-statistical data files and the random type selection from it. The approached prospective informant must have the understanding that she or he was individually picked because she or he has to offer very specific biographical (experiential) data,

which acknowledge and underline her or his personal uniqueness. Otherwise the establishment of the autobiographical trust relationship between the two partners of the interview as the essential condition for autobiographical narration would not be possible. (Schütze nd.: 3)

Therefore, in the opinion of the author of the method, it is neither possible nor advisable to select people randomly for two reasons. Firstly, the method generates so much data that it is not possible to use it to study as many people as are usually selected for a survey sample. This argument is understandable, but only partially. It is indeed true: it is difficult or impossible to analyze a large number of interviews using Schütze's method, as known to anyone who has gone through all the analytical steps for one interview. On the other hand, we can imagine a small number of cases being randomly selected, if this is somehow justified by the nature of the study. The second argument quoted in the text is that the research participants must be selected because of certain specific biographical features that are not found in official registers. This is, of course, often true, but in the case of some research topics studied with this method in recent years (for example, European identity—Miller, Day [eds.] 2012; post-socialist transformation—Kaźmierska [ed.] 2016, precarious forms of employment—Mrozowicki 2016), the characteristics of respondents which are important for the researcher when selecting "cases" are not so unique that one could not consider (at least hypothetically) a selection method with at least some elements of randomness. Of course, as the analysis of the collected interviews proceeds, the "field" of selection becomes narrow-

er because with the development of the theoretical model, the searched cases become ever more particular. Schütze develops his second argument against the use of random selection by emphasizing that the person chosen for the interview should understand that she/he has specific "data" to offer to the researcher and, therefore, is unique. But, does being selected for research from a random sample, even a "representative" one, denigrate the individual uniqueness of the interviewees? We will get back to this question later.

Schütze points out that snowballing is the most appropriate case selection method in his approach. The procedure can be started with the help of "intermediate, contact-establishing persons," who will identify potential interviewees who are "topically relevant for the research" and "knowledgeable" (Schütze nd: 3).

Interviews with Respondents of the POLPAN Survey—Reflections from Field Practice

As mentioned above, in the case of biographical interviews with POLPAN respondents, the selection was based on a random sample, selected for the study in the 1980s. The respondents did not know one another. To make an appointment for a biographical interview, we called potential interviewees. The framework of telephone conversations imposed high demands on both the researcher and the potential narrator. Within a few minutes, the researcher had to introduce themselves and explain why they are calling this particular person, but also explain their expectations regarding the biographical

interview by posing a task that most of the existing POLPAN respondents faced for the first time in their lives. In turn, during that short conversation the interviewees were to imagine what was expected of them and then decide whether they would like (and would be able) to entrust details of their own biography, sometimes involving strong emotional experiences, to a stranger.

In the case of the snowball sampling, the researcher who conducts a telephone conversation can always refer to an earlier contact with another person that the interlocutor knows and generally has a positive attitude towards. This situation gives rise to a sense of interpersonal obligation. In our case, we could only refer to the POLPAN survey and the implementing institution, that is, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences. In order to conduct 44 interviews, we needed to contact nearly 90 respondents, which means the percentage of refusals was around 50%. Refusal was usually justified by one of two reasons. The first and the most common one was ill health, understood very broadly: from physical limitations to mental condition, sometimes associated with advanced age (statements such as: “my hearing is very poor and I can hardly see anything,” “I am old and can’t remember anything, my head is not working well,” “I am ill and I have to focus on doctor’s appointments,” “I’m going to hospital soon and can’t get involved in it,” “I don’t want to recall certain things, it’s bad for my nerves,” “what do I know, I’m old, let the younger people speak”). The second declared reason for refusals was the feeling that the respondent’s life was very ordinary and not worth telling, or bothering a researcher from Warsaw to come for

this purpose (utterances such as: “What’s there to tell you?”, “Nothing very special happened in my life,” “There’s nothing to talk about”). Of course, we also know these phrases from the search for interlocutors with the snowball method. However, this high percentage of refusals gives food for thought, but does not necessarily undermine the random selection method: it seems that a refusal is easier here, and the number of refusals is perhaps closer to actual reluctance about participating in a sociological study.

The interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ place of residence. Personal contact with respondents who agreed to give an interview over the phone proceeded in different ways, depending primarily on individual personality traits, including the degree of openness to new experiences, such as meeting an unknown person and telling them about one’s life, or the general level of trust in people. Some interviewees started their story almost right after opening the door, while others needed a lot of additional explanations and time to “check” whether they could safely open up to the researcher and to what extent.

A classic autobiographical narrative interview begins with a short request to the interviewee about narrating her/his life. Then the interviewee spontaneously talks about her/his biography for several dozen minutes, without any questions from the interviewer. At least this is the optimal scenario, and this is how such interviews are usually presented in academic articles (as model interviews). However, we soon faced situations where recording such an interview turned out to be impossible: the narra-

tor would “get stuck,” spoke very concisely, or even explicitly asked for questions “because it will be easier for me to speak in this way.” In many cases, the free-flowing narrative ended after 5-10 minutes. Sometimes, it had the form of a concise resume: “I was born... I graduated from school in... I took up a job and then got married” et cetera. In an extreme case, a narrator who had spent all of her life in a village, summarized her life in one sentence before the researcher managed to turn on the voice recorder. This situation may be explained by referring to many circumstances, some of which have already been mentioned: the respondents may feel that they have “no story to tell,” they may have no training in performing such “tasks,” the researcher’s request may be inadequate vis-à-vis the respondent’s everyday experience, the researchers may have insufficiently explained their expectations, or the interviewees’ previous participation in a questionnaire-based survey may have given rise to certain ideas about researchers’ expectations. The problem of researchers’ preparation and skills is always problematic, as the autobiographical narrative interview method places high expectations on researchers, requiring them not only to learn the rules, but also to demonstrate high communication competences and interpersonal skills. Whatever the reasons, we often had to put a lot of effort into sustaining and developing the narrative. However, this picture would be too pessimistic if we ended it there. About a half of the interviews start with a longer narrative by the respondent, not interrupted by unnecessary questions, and only sometimes supported by a comment or encouragement to continue the story. Even the interviews that were more strongly “stimulated” with questions tend to contain longer, narrative sections,

although usually scattered throughout the interview. A failure can be said to have occurred in two interviews, where the interviewees had not been properly informed of what was expected of them. If duration is adopted as one of the quality criteria (of course, this criterion is far from sufficient, but it initially implies the degree of narrating), biographical interviews with respondents of the POLPAN survey did not turn out bad in this respect: the average interview duration was 1 hour and 50 minutes (including two very short, actually unsuccessful interviews, mentioned above).⁶

Narratives of “Peasants”: What Was the Benefit of Selecting Interviewees from a Random Sample?

In 2017, in preparation for the conference of the Biographical Research Section of the Polish Sociological Association,⁷ we decided to take a closer look at the biographical interviews with POLPAN respondents that were conducted with farmers or “peasants” (the title of our paper referred to Józef Chałasiński’s well-known 1938 work entitled *Młode pokolenie chłopów* [Young generation of peasants]). The interviews conducted with those respondents resulted in several observations which seem important for these deliberations.

First of all, it turned out that the collection of interviews with POLPAN respondents included nar-

⁶ 14 interviews lasted over 2 hours; the longest one took 3.5 hours.

⁷ Conference of the Biographical Research Section of the Polish Sociological Association: *Metoda – Etyka – Praktyka* [Method – Ethics – Practice], Polish Sociological Association, Spała, 24–25 May 2017.

ratives from persons whose lives were associated with agriculture and rural life in different ways and at different stages of life. We had only a handful of cases of “peasants” who had been born in the countryside and spent their entire lives working on the family farm. They could probably be conceived of as (stereo)typical cases to some extent, although sometimes an unexpected life event challenged the typicality of these “purely rural” biographies. People whose biographies we considered while preparing the aforementioned paper included also:

- Zofia, a seamstress from one of the largest cities in Poland, who talked about her childhood and young years in the countryside (especially during the Nazi occupation) for almost a half of the 2.5-hour interview,
- Jakub, a “peasant-worker” who combined work on his own farm with work in the railways for many years,
- Teresa, who worked most of her life in the state-owned, agricultural sector (first in a state-owned farm, and then on a farm affiliated as a state-owned, agricultural school),
- Czesław, a graduate of the Agricultural Academy, who worked in the government administration connected with agriculture for many years, but when his wife inherited a farm, he decided to become a farmer at the age of 45.⁸

⁸ This case was probably most distant from the (stereo)typical image of a Polish farmer aged about 75 years, especially when the narrator talked about his leisure activities (annual skiing trips).

What can we infer from these brief biographies and the stories behind them? We believe that the biographies of interviewees “taken out” of a quantitative survey based on a random sample represent many unobvious variants of “peasantry,” which would be difficult to find in typical qualitative research on this group. The snowball method would most probably lead us to more obvious “peasant biographies.”

The second aspect, which became obvious when we looked at the interviews from our collection, was the importance of geographic location for the stories of peasant families and the narrators themselves. This aspect is closely related to the history of Poland. For example, when describing his childhood in the countryside in the eastern part of the country, a respondent named Jan said that the land farmed by his great-grandfather’s descendants was divided into more than twenty small parcels, which was the reason why his family was poor. The fragmentation of land was a consequence of the agrarian reform carried out in 1864 in the lands formerly under Russian control and of the construction of the Warsaw-Lviv section of the railway line (a few years later), which additionally divided the already small fields. In another case, one of the turning points in the story told by Alina was her family’s post-war removal from central Poland to a post-German farm located in the so-called Western Lands.

The third aspect that drew attention was that some of the interviewees, despite their ability to offer a long, free-flowing narrative, would probably not have passed the “good narrator/informant” test if

such a test had ever been invented and carried out. Such respondents would include Gabriela, whose life story had a spiral structure, and she returned to the description of contacts with deceased family members once every few minutes. We would also include Henryk, whose narrative was so chaotic that it first greatly confused the interviewer, and then gave a headache to our transcriber, who was trying to control the flow of words with punctuation marks. At the same time, in our opinion, both narratives contained valuable research material that could be successfully used in sociological analyses.

Final Reflections

On the basis of this short confrontation with empirical material, we would like to share a few reflections with our readers. The first one concerns the **difficulty of capturing the experience of the so-called “ordinary person,”** potentially everyone, using **biographical sociology tools, especially with the use of the autobiographical narrative interview.** “Everyman his own historian,” as Carl L. Becker once brilliantly said, developing this idea in an interesting way, when opening the Congress of the American Historical Society (1931) as its President. Today, these words refer much more strongly to the (aspirations of) biographical sociology, as well as oral history inspired by it, rather than to academic historiography.

Fritz Schütze emphasizes the role of Anselm Strauss among his “significant others” in social science (Schütze 2014). Strauss devoted a large part of his scholarly work to the sociology of medicine, an-

alyzing the situation of chronically ill patients or even dying people (see, e.g., Glaser, Strauss 1965; Glaser, Strauss 1968). Schütze himself has also repeatedly dealt with biographies of people who had experienced difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences affecting both individuals and entire communities, such as those connected with the Second World War. Perhaps this is the reason why the “process structure” best described in Schütze’s work is the trajectory of suffering (Riemann, Schütze 1991; Schütze 1997). Moreover, we said earlier that according to the author of the concept of autobiographical narrative interview, the researched person should understand her or his “uniqueness,” the uniqueness of their own biography and its value for the researcher. Reflection on this issue gives rise to a number of questions. Is this method suitable for studying people who, in their subjective view, have had no significant or at least difficult experiences? Do such cases end up in the “sample” when they are selected using the snowball method? Or perhaps the sample is more likely to include people who are convinced that they have “something to tell” or who others think of as “interesting people”? Are we losing anything because of this? Does this have any impact on the final conclusions and sociological generalizations? Can the method be used in projects aimed at studying “ordinary people,” stable life filled with everyday activities and, if so, how? In the context of a project aimed at researching the transformation experience, Kaja Kaźmierska and Fritz Schütze write:

Biographical research shows that “normality” cannot be easily narrated: it is difficult, without positive motivation, to talk about everyday life not filled with

“unusual” events or significant collective-historical turns, or exceptional collective emotions. (Każmierska, Schütze 2013: 129).⁹

Referring to the well-known juxtaposition of biography as a *topic* in itself and biography as a *means* to study social phenomena (Helling 1990), we may ask about the interviews that do not contain a biographical narrative that meets the minimum analytical conditions: What ends are they means to?

Many years ago, Norman Denzin pointed out the cultural determinants of the way in which biographies are perceived and narrated:

The notion that lives are turned around by significant events, what I call *epiphanies*, is deeply entrenched in Western thought. At least since Augustine, the idea of transformation has been a central part of the autobiographical and biographical form. This means that biographical texts will typically be structured by the significant, turning-point moment in a subject's life. (Denzin 1989: 22)

During a biographical conference held in May 2018 in Wrocław,¹⁰ Christine Delory-Momberger deliv-

⁹ The problems faced by some respondents when trying to present a linear biographical narrative of long-term periods filled with repetitive everyday activities are also evidenced in interviews obtained in other research projects, for example, in the project by Sylwia Urbańska, who studied the experiences of female economic migrants from eastern Poland (Urbańska 2015), or by Marcin Jewdokimow and his collaborators, who conducted interviews with nuns and monks (materials analyzed during the biographical research seminar at the University of Lodz, 12 October 2018).

¹⁰ The conference entitled *W przestrzeni biografii – identyfikacja doświadczeń, procesów i zmian. Międzynarodowa Konferencja Naukowa z okazji 100-lecia wydania dzieła „Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce” Williama Thomasa i Floriana Znanińskiego [In the biographical space; Identification of experience, processes and change. International Scholarly Conference to mark the 100th anniversary*

ered a paper where, citing Michael Rustin¹¹ among others, she stated that contemporary Western culture requires an individual to define an individual sense of her or his own life and to have the skill of narrating it. The ability to verbally present one's own life story depends on the benefits that an individual can gain, for example, receiving support from social assistance institutions or finding employment. In this way, a biography or, rather, the ability to reflect on it and put it into words, becomes a source of new inequalities: not everyone knows how to narrate their lives in an appropriate way, one that “sells” well. We may wonder if this also happens in the field of biographical research, where we are more eager to “buy” (consciously or not) stories that have a more dynamic, interesting plot, filled with various events. Thus, we require our narrators to have a conceptualization of their own biographies that makes them “worth telling.” Definitely many of our narrators do not fulfil these requirements.

The second reflection, related to the previous one, concerns the **unequal sense of comfort among some narrators about the very idea of telling a story of one's own life**. “Telling one's life” is a phrase, and a task, that probably does not fit into the everyday experience of many people. This is something people do not do every day, and some people may feel that perhaps one should not do it, for example, because it may be seen as a waste of time, “idle talk”

of the publication of ‘The Polish Peasant in Europe and America’ by William Thomas and Florian Znaniński], Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa, 9–11 May, Wrocław, Poland. Professor Christine Delory-Momberger's paper was entitled “Biography: A new configuration of an individual's relationship with society / La biographie: une nouvelle configuration du rapport de l'individu de l'au social”].

¹¹ See, e.g., Rustin 2000.

that does not produce any measurable results, or leads to “self-pity.” In the case of rural narrators, it is sometimes easier to obtain stories about the course of warfare in their area, about events in the life of their community or local customs than about their own lives.¹² From this perspective, a biographical interview may sometimes turn out to be a technique that is not less “exotic” for the respondent as a questionnaire-based interview, and unsuitable to offer insights into the respondents’ worlds, even though survey interviews are often criticized by qualitative researchers as tools that impose researchers’ categories on the respondents. This criticism is sometimes right, but, on the other hand, the sharp contrast between a questionnaire and the “naturalness” of a narrative biographical interview (often taken for granted by qualitative researchers) is not always reflected in the research practice. Although the narrator speaks her or his own language in a biographical interview, the situation of speaking about oneself in such a way is neither common nor natural.

Based on their research experience, Maruška Svašek and Markieta Domecka wrote:

[T]he task of autobiographical narration may not make sense to people unfamiliar with performative genres of one-to-one self-disclosure, so may be entirely inappropriate and unproductive in certain settings (cf. Tonkin 1992). The method also projects specific assumptions about the process of inter-personal communication and about selfhood as the focus of reflective narration and the construction of the protagonist

(see Moretti 1987). Having used the methods in various projects, we have noticed that people who have direct or indirect knowledge of counselling practices, those with an interest in family history, and migrants who have had to suddenly adjust to different life situations and have conceptualised their lives in terms of chapters ‘before’ and ‘after’ migration, have tended to find it easier to respond to the task than some other groups. (nd.:4)¹³

The third reflection concerns **reaching out to varied cases, that is, to people who experienced the given phenomenon or process to different degrees and in different ways**. While in biographical approaches the use of theoretical sampling for selecting the next (contrasting) case is—or at least should be—the result of gradually progressing analysis, in this project diversity somehow manifested itself to us without any effort on our part. Even in such a small sample that we were able to choose for our interviews, randomness brought unexpectedly high variety. The life stories of Polish “peasants” and their narrative articulations, including those very distant from the rules of sociological biographical research, were highly varied. Would we have reached *such* people if it had not been for the underlying random sample? We do not know. What we *do* know, however, is that we would not have been able to reach *these*

¹³ The authors continue: “There may also be personal reasons for why some interviewees find it easier to tell their story; some are simply more talkative than others, and others may find easier rapport with a particular interviewer because of shared gender, ethnic background or for other personal reasons. We have both been confronted with situations where informants found it hard to engage in a monologue and demanded to be asked specific questions. While the method simply failed in such situations, these occasions stimulated our reflection on the requirements posed on the narrators and the conditions facilitating and impeding autobiographical narration.”

¹² In addition, we noticed that dramatic events, such as the death of a loved one, are generally narrated with a lot of brevity, and the narratives reflect coming to terms with one’s fate.

particular, very different interlocutors. Thus, certain dimensions of differentiation, and certain alternative versions of peasant or semi-peasant fates would not have emerged during the analysis conducted among persons selected using snowball sampling. It is impossible to prove this empirically because it is impossible to conduct a study “parallel” to ours, but based on snowball sampling. However, we believe, and this is confirmed by the experience of one of us in more classic projects involving biographical sociology and oral history, that the use of a “more randomized” method of selecting interviewees increases the probability of having more diverse biographical experiences.

Since the biographical experiences *within* the analyzed cases would be different if we implied snowball sampling, our generalizations concerning the biographical experiences of Polish “peasants” in recent decades would probably be different as well. In other words, our analyses would be cases of something else. They would provide a different final picture. Does this mean that they would be worse while those based on a random sample (or, rather, its elements) are any better? Not necessarily. What we mean is greater caution in treating the analyzed biographies as cases, types, or patterns of broader, more general, structural phenomena.

Do we really explore these macro-scale phenomena comprehensively thanks to our qualitative research? Or rather, do we create different, always “incomplete” variants, depending on how we select our cases?

Of course, it is neither possible nor necessary to replace the snowball method by a random selection method based on a questionnaire survey on a larger scale. However, since we have had the opportunity to make such an “experiment” and, according to our knowledge, this opportunity is quite unique in sociological biographical research—although known, perhaps surprisingly, from classical British *oral history* studies (Thompson 1975)—we can look at some methodological practices and theoretical constructs within the “biographical method in sociology” from a different perspective. A case and a case study are such practices and constructs. We encourage everyone, including ourselves, to be more reflexive in our use of these practices and constructs, and to ask: What do they refer to? (And how do we know what they refer to?) Which life cases are they made of? (And what do they mean for whom?) What do we want to tell others by referring to them? Hasty answers seem simple, but we do not find them very convincing. And the sociological *Everyman* is perhaps less tangible now than ever before.

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Od przypadku do studium przypadku – i z powrotem, albo o poszukiwaniu *everymana* w badaniach biograficznych

Abstrakt: Socjologiczne jakościowe badania biograficzne wyróżnia zainteresowanie *przypadkiem*. Jednocześnie dąży się w nich – często za pośrednictwem *studium przypadku* – do zrozumienia lub wyjaśnienia zjawisk ponadindywidualnych, powtarzalnych, do pewnego stopnia ogólnych. W artykule przyglądamy się sposobowi traktowania przypadków w socjologii biograficznej. Przedstawiamy własne doświadczenia empiryczne, polegające na przeprowadzeniu autobiograficznych wywiadów narracyjnych z uczestnikami ogólnopolskiego, panelowego badania surveyowego, którzy zostali do niego przed laty wylosowani. Pokazujemy, jakie konsekwencje – metodologiczne i teoretyczne – może mieć taki, nietypowy dla socjologii biograficznej, sposób doboru przypadków. Zastanawiamy się, czy i do jakiego stopnia doświadczenie „zwykłego człowieka”, *everymana*, może zostać odzwierciedlone w pracach socjologicznych opartych na metodzie biograficznej.

Słowa kluczowe: przypadek, studium przypadku, socjologia biograficzna, autobiograficzny wywiad narracyjny, metody doboru przypadków, dobór próby, Polskie Badanie Panelowe POLPAN