

November 1992

Narrative Analysis and Political Autobiography

Matti Hyvarinen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hyvarinen, Matti (1992) "Narrative Analysis and Political Autobiography," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 20 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol20/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND POLITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Matti Hyvärinen
University of Tampere

The study of autobiographies has become increasingly important during recent decades both in sociology and literature.¹ It is also noteworthy that a number of classical autobiographies can be read as major texts in political writing. The confessions of St. Augustine and of Jean-Jacques Rousseau were decisive for the progress of the autobiographical tradition; these pioneers were followed by eminent writers such as Benjamin Franklin and Henry David Thoreau.² Despite the proliferation of political autobiography, political scientists (along with sociologists and practitioners of oral history) have not been overly eager to elaborate a methodology for reading them, nor to write at any length about the collection of autobiographical or biographical interviews.³

For my own research I have interviewed 36 former student activists in order to understand the political culture of the Finnish student movement of the 1970s. My strategy has been to approach as closely as possible the autobiographical narrative, and to let the interviewees tell their stories very much as they like. Developing this strategy—which I call “narrative interview”—has, of course, resulted in substantial problems, which must be addressed using narrative analysis. These are problems germane to the collection and evaluation of autobiographical or biographical material.

POLITICS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A CASE-STUDY

Publishing a political autobiography or biography or writing one's own autobiography are undoubtedly political acts, often with further political implications. A famous Finnish example involves Ahti Karjalainen, the former prime minister and foreign minister, who published his memoirs in the fall of 1989. The book, written with the collaboration of the notable Finnish political historian Jukka Tarkka, was important politically because of the intimate and decade-long cooperation between Karjalainen and the former president Urho Kekkonen. This intimacy was accurately expressed in the title given to the book, *The President's Minister*.

The impact of the book was remarkable, particularly with respect to the re-evaluation of President Kekkonen's years in office. It laid bare Kekkonen's strategic use of his position in Finnish foreign affairs, and particularly his warm relationship with the leaders of the Soviet Union, to promote his own interests in internal politics. More intriguing were the revelations concerning Paavo Väyrynen, leader of the Center Party and former foreign minister, who had been involved in negotiations with a high-ranking Soviet diplomat and KGB colonel, Viktor Vladimirov, before the presidential elections of 1982. Karjalainen's memoirs disclosed that Väyrynen and Vladimirov had discussed Soviet support for Karjalainen's candidacy in a forthcoming presidential election-race against Dr. Mauno Koivisto.

These autobiographical memoirs generated a political debate which continued for several months and involved major politicians, including the reserved and normally silent President Koivisto. Ironically, the popularity of Väyrynen—the ostensible villain of the story—and of his Centre Party did not diminish during or after this debate, but actually increased. Väyrynen prudently left the party leadership in the spring 1990, but was nominated once again for foreign minister after the Center Party's massive electoral victory in the parliamentary elections of March 1991.

My point here is not to evaluate the political impact of this debate, but simply to cite it as an incident in which autobiography becomes political. But a further question arises concerning the role of the political historian Tarkka. In his own preface, Tarkka tells us that he merely helped Karjalainen in his work, and that all the material was chosen by the presumed author. Tarkka informs us that he interviewed Karjalainen for ten hours and that the voice in the book is "the voice of Karjalainen."⁴ Karjalainen, for his part, declared that he would "sign everything" in his memoirs, and that the book was definitely his own story.⁵

THE POLITICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Karjalainen example illustrates the triad of factors—writing, interviewing and signing—which must be considered when using autobiographical and biographical resources in political science and political history. Literary theorists are well acquainted with the question, "Who is the 'I' speaking here?" An "I" could be a narrator in the text, or a character divulging thoughts to the text as if in the past, or a person who has grown up during the story and is now reflecting on his or her past, or an authorial persona

constructed during the process of writing.⁶ Martine Burgos has articulated this abundance of "subjects" very well:

. . . we should distinguish carefully between three types of concretization of the subject: the subject as a real interviewee, the subject who is constructed in the story, and the narrator of the story. Each of these concretizations refers, in the story, to the same person; but each nonetheless has a particular place within the narrative structure.⁷

"I can sign every word" simply attempts to dispel this multiplicity and to incorporate all these different persons into a single solid and continuous subject. But this subject is highly artificial; one can sign statements, declarations or testimonies for different reasons without having previously written or thought about these expressions of selfhood. To sign is a legal act and as such is quite different from constructing oneself through autobiographical writing.⁸

"I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent," wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*, "and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. . . . But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world." These opening words alone would have made Rousseau's fascinating *Confessions* memorable—and imitated. In spite of the fact that he had countless predecessors in religious confessions and then followers in all walks of life, his insistence on originality and uniqueness has nonetheless pervaded the entire autobiographical tradition.⁹

This "tradition of originality" is indisputably a paradoxical, even contradictory phenomenon. After Rousseau we must speak of "tradition," "genre" or "socially determined ways of telling one's life." But as this genre presumes novelty and uniqueness, so ". . . each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm."¹⁰ The way of narrating is fundamental to the whole act of telling one's own life story. Following Rousseau's lead, the significance of language, style, metaphors and other rhetorical strategies must be recognized. The selection of rhetorical strategies is directly linked to perspectives that are genuinely political.

Jerome Bruner has delineated the constructivist or "world-making" aspects of different life stories in a compelling way. From his perspective, stories "do not 'happen' in the real world

but, rather, are constructed in people's heads."¹¹ Telling stories is the most ubiquitous way of representing one's life, occurring more frequently and habitually than any presumed logical way of thinking. Bruner's starting point is the concept of "lived time," and the problem of describing it. As a constructivist he denies the psychological reality of "life itself," because the psychological experience of "lived time" is already itself a narrative.¹² So we live in the midst of stories, we compare these stories, and we construct new ones. "We belong to history before telling stories or writing history," as Paul Ricoeur put it.¹³

As constructions, life stories are situated in time and place; they are oriented to the present, and hence to current personal, social, and political perspectives. It is generally accepted that telling one's life story inevitably involves some rationalization of the past.¹⁴ As Daphne Patai puts it, "a particular version of one's life story may become an essential component of one's sense of identity."¹⁵ From the constructivist point of view, then, the telling of one's life story covers not only the past, but incorporates the present situation and future perspectives as well. The daring *Confessions* of Rousseau were, of course, published only posthumously and would thus have to be interpreted as an exception. But the book itself concludes with a vivid depiction of how Rousseau is telling the story to a group of his closest friends.

This emphasis on the present situation has far-reaching political implications. Burgos goes on to inquire as to the ultimate "need" to tell a life story, which she does not take to be a natural activity. She concludes: "A life story can be considered as a reaction to an actual situation in which the subject's self-identity (which is something he must have in order to be able to present a narrator's point of view) seems to be threatened."¹⁶ To tell one's story means to construct oneself in a threatening situation.

How, then, are we to understand this "threat"? Here we are quite close to the difference between biography and autobiography. According to Burgos, we need at least a minimal self-identity to be able to narrate our lives or to "present a narrator's point of view." But if this self-identity is too self-evident or rigid, the narrator will have no genuine need to construct the self as subject within the story and, therefore, no genuine need to tell the story at all. Here, it seems, Burgos is allowing for the possibility of a certain discontinuity of the subject, and thus, of the narrative. In this light we might perhaps interpret the debate between post-structuralist and phenomenologically oriented scholars as a real tension in the production of autobiography itself. The life-itself-is-not-a-narrative thesis should now be read as a threat to the

identity of the narrating subject—and to the coherence of the subject that narrative implies.

Let us follow this theme in a critical essay by Pierre Bourdieu. Life history, he states, could be interpreted as a rhetorical construction which we should inspect much more closely.¹⁷ From his perspective the term “life history” presumes “the not insignificant presupposition” that life really is a history, described through well-known metaphors such as road, path, journey or trajectory. First and foremost it is presupposed “that ‘life’ is a whole, a coherent and finalized whole, which can and must be seen as the unitary expression of a subjective and objective ‘intention’ of a project. . . . This life is organized as a history, and unfolds according to a chronological order which is also a logical order, with a beginning, an origin . . . and termination, which is also a goal.”¹⁸ In Bourdieu’s view there is no distinction between autobiography and biography. In both cases events merely unfold in interviews or during recollecting. Both the interviewee and interviewer cooperate in finding meaning, order and chronology in the material. This implies a tendency to make oneself “the ideologist of one’s own life.”¹⁹ Bourdieu utilizes the modernist novel—especially William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*—in order to articulate, as he says, the “double break” with direction and meaning in narrative.

According to Bourdieu, the problem is that “the person” is essentially a rhetorical construction supported by a proper name and other social obligations. A proper name and various official records support the social identity of a person across time and place, and they provide the structure of a life story in advance. “Rites of institution” concerning proper name-giving afford absolute, clear-cut divisions in experience, quite remote from a “person’s” life, which is filled with individual accidents. We should therefore understand a proper name as an institutionally supported conceptual grid, which becomes the only “natural” way of arranging and recollecting one’s experiences. At his best Bourdieu has dismantled the romantic optimism embedded in the “authentic” life story:

And all this permits us to suppose that the laws of official biography will tend to impose themselves quite beyond official situations. This occurs through unconscious assumptions about the interview (like the concern for chronology, and all that which is inherent in the representation of a life history) and through the interview situation. . . .²⁰

Having said all this, Bourdieu remains faithful to the tradition of the autobiography. What he is seeking is a version of the original experience behind official and routinized ways of telling one's story. His criticism could even be understood as an attempt to rejuvenate Rousseau's project of expressing one's political life with new linguistic, rhetorical and narrative methods. Hence the decisive references to modernist literature from Marcel Proust to Faulkner and Alain Robbe-Grillet, in order to articulate the discontinuities of "a life." However, the example of is more difficult for Bourdieu's position. Although it is true that the novel presumes the "double break" with direction and meaning, this break is reached by introducing a narrator, Benjy, who is mad.²¹ Speech without a sense of time-in-progress and without any difference between the past and the present can only be the speech of a lunatic. Telling stories with a beginning, middle and end belongs to one of the central methods of interpreting and organizing everyday experience, just as Bruner, Ricoeur, David Carr, Dan McAdams and many others have stated.

Let us return to Burgos and to the "minimal identity" presupposed by the narrator. Now we can give two explanations of the "threat" endangering this identity, which was, as Burgos said, the presupposition for the narrator's point of view. On the one hand, in Faulkner we learn that madness can destroy this point of view and the capacity to construct a narrative. On the other hand Bourdieu notes that one's own story can be threatened by state-supported demands for continuity. The threat which concerns us now is the capacity to tell one's own story instead of simply repeating official records; hence the strong interest in modernist literature.²² If traditional autobiography tries to answer the question, "Who am I?," the famous quasi-autobiography of Nathalie Sarraute asks the question, "Who is me?," or "Is that me?"²³ Sarraute abandons—as far as possible—the narrator's omniscient point of view, and so tries to review the "sources" of her life as revealed in her own memory.

Now we can begin to draw conclusions from the discussion so far. First, autobiographies and life stories are constructions apparently affected by the narrator's present situation and future perspectives. If they are true and honest documents, they are true and honest for the narrator-creator of that present. Second, autobiographies incorporate a multitude of "concretizations of subjects": as a real interviewee, as the subject constructed in the story, as the narrator of the story, and possibly others. Third, the form and style of the story are not innocent of politics. State-supported institutions concerning a proper name and personal

continuity presume the chronology and coherence of these "concretizations of subjects."

In any case, the coherence of life stories can be seen either as a virtue or as an ideological illusion. Scholars like McAdams and Walter R. Fischer are inclined to promote the virtue perspective, while others, like Bourdieu, sternly associate coherence with "biographical illusion."²⁴ However, both of these extremes seem to be somewhat unsatisfactory for concrete research. As Norman K. Denzin puts it, it might be much more productive to investigate empirically the different strategies for constructing biographical coherence.²⁵

We can now reassess the case of *The President's Minister*. The debate that followed the publication of the book revealed that Tarkka had realistically gauged the public reaction. In fact, there is even a division of the narrator: Tarkka became the hero-narrator who reveals the secrets of the president's power system; whereas Karjalainen became the anti-hero of the story, the faithful servant who never quite measured up to the presidency.

The most important methodological question is this: how is it possible to combine the future perspectives of two writers so intimately that one can express the voice of the other? These memoirs tell the story of a competent politician who was dismissed from his post as President of the Bank of Finland. In general it is thought that he was dismissed because of a drinking problem. If we believe the memoirs ("Karjalainen as a competent President of the Bank of Finland and a potential President of Finland"), it is difficult to understand why Karjalainen did not write his book alone. Why did he need help from a well-known historian? But if we do not believe the flattering characterization depicted in the memoirs and choose instead the drink-related explanation for his dismissal and failure to become president, we have an even more severe problem with the "signing" of the memoirs. We have then to accept that Karjalainen was not able to write his own memoirs, or, as Burgos puts it, to have the "coherent point of view of the narrator." The distance between writing and signing has become too great.²⁶

The memoirs tell the readers of Karjalainen's self-effacing deference towards his parents, President Kekkonen, the Soviet Union, and Vladimirov. He always seems to be second. After issuing his memoirs the situation was unpleasantly similar: the hero was Tarkka, another writer. "But let each one of them reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity, and may any man who dares, say, I was a better man than he," asserts Rousseau.²⁷ Unfortunately Karjalainen did not measure up to this famous maxim and classical objective of autobiography. He

became a national anti-hero and a negative symbol of "Kekkonen's era," while other politicians were able to remain quiet or pretend to be better.

Of course, we cannot be satisfied with the bare report concerning the ten hours of interview that Tarkka conducted. What kind of questions were posed? What did the researcher actually do to be able to speak "with the voice of Karjalainen"? If we admit that every interview, narrative text, or autobiography is a construct affected by the whole context—political and personal situations, interview as opposed to writing, the nature of the interview, the personality of the interviewer, etc.—we can begin to understand all the contingencies related to the act of signing.²⁸ In other words, the process of signing cannot deliver the endangered coherence of the narrating subject. The result is somewhere between biography and autobiography, but no one knows exactly where.

THE INTERVIEW AND NARRATION

The "fallacy of coherence" discussed by Bourdieu has repercussions for both writing biography and evaluating autobiography. However, this does not imply a contrast between narrative and non-narrative forms of literature. Here we can follow Ricoeur and his depiction of history as a "way of resurrecting the forgotten" and as an embodiment of all "the values which governed the actions of individuals, the life of institutions, the struggles of the past." To meet this challenge, we need "to put into parentheses our own desires."²⁹

Unfortunately, writers of autobiographies are not capable of putting their "own desires into parentheses." The honest, revealing, and open confessions of Rousseau were written to demonstrate how impossible it would have been to say, "I was a better man than he."³⁰ The prescient narrator dominates the protagonist in the memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir as well. In the case of Karjalainen, his drinking, which is carefully minimized in the memoirs, may ironically explain the absence or at least the eclipse of the intrusive and omniscient narrator. This is not to diminish the relevance of autobiography as opposed to biography; rather it is to specify its "natural" form as a coherent story. Modernist writers asking, "Who is me?" are approaching the role of the historian in putting their "own desires into parentheses," and so disputing the automatic coherence of the story.

Ricoeur recognizes the proximity of fiction to history. "To recognize the values of the past in their difference with respect to our values is already to open up the real towards

possible. The 'true' histories of the past uncover the buried potentialities of the present."³¹ So a "truly" historical autobiography would be a painful and dangerous endeavor; it would presuppose a threat to the coherence of the subject and to the chronology of the story.

Thus far I have argued against the romantic, naturalistic way of reading and interpreting autobiographical material, and I have tried to sensitize political scientists to the study of narrative forms in autobiography. To interpret autobiographical material merely as testimony by the "best possible witness of his/her life" misses the selectivity inherent in the author's point of view, and the importance of style and structure in the narrative to any analysis.

For similar reasons Burgos wants to differentiate "autobiographical testimony" from "life story":

The "I" which develops from the testimony does not function in the same manner as the "I" of the life story. The first presents himself as a speaker for a trans-individual subject whose objective is to assure the preservation and transmission of a collective experience. The second—the "I" of the life story—recounts the genesis of an individual who becomes the narrator in the course of the story: the events he describes are the stages of an experience by means of which the subject develops the dialectic of identity and difference, exclusion and inclusion, of closeness and distance. . . .

Indeed, Burgos thinks that this difference dominates the style of the text so deeply that in autobiographical testimony "literature is forbidden," but in a life story it is not only accepted but even required.³²

Burgos emphasizes the production of different types of autobiographical material, but there are also differences in the reception and interpretation of autobiographical interviews. We might tentatively distinguish three different strategies for reading interviews based on the interviewee's "political life story":

1. Stories as testimonies describing past political thinking, processes and cultures ("seen by an authentic witness").

2. Stories as testimonies about the narrator's real life in the past political context ("seen by the best possible witness").
3. Stories as constructed life stories or narrative constructions.

These different reading strategies have a significant effect on the questions put by researchers to narrative material and by interviewers to interviewees. In the first strategy, we are most interested in the adequacy of memory and in the honesty of testimony. We might compare different statements and contrast them with documentary materials. This approach is familiar in traditional biographical research.³³

However, there are some problems in using interviewees as witnesses. If the researchers know beforehand of the most relevant themes for questioning and of the official train of events under discussion, what then will be the real space allowed to the interviewee? Should we not, rather, take as the starting point the private, personal life of the narrator and then look for the "political" through this subjective point of view? Here, too, we have to pose questions concerning the trustworthiness of testimony. Should we really believe that politically active and adroit people would give a full and reliable description of their lives and actions?

The second strategy addressing this disconcerting problem is the so-called in-depth interview, in which the interviewer and interviewee get to know each other over several meetings and many hours of interviews.³⁴ At the extreme there could be an ethnographic study of one person who could be interviewed over several years. However, the "depth" remains relative in all cases. Two years is still a very short time in the context of psychoanalysis. What is even more essential is that the process of psychoanalysis does not simply seek to reveal the "true" story, but rather to re-tell and re-configure a life story.³⁵ Reflecting on one's own story means, in any event, changing and reconstructing it. An in-depth interview presupposes, too, some original and true life story which lies—literally—deep in our minds. On the ontological level this presupposition is of one predominant and relatively stable "true" story, instead of multiple contingent constructions.

Corresponding to these different ways of reading interviews we could also specify different modes of asking questions and interviewing. In the first strategy, we could identify the thematic, chronological interview. The researcher seeks out certain facts and comments on important themes. "Did you participate, and in what manner, in the student strikes of 1970?"

According to my approach, such "thematic questions" should be minimized, and, if included, placed at the end of the interview.

The second strategy implies a more ethnographic approach, in which the interviewer proceeds by asking about terms, themes and persons already mentioned by the interviewee.³⁶ James Spradley has explicitly recognized the problem embedded in this strategy: ethnographic interviewing presupposes a currently existing culture, but what we are examining is actually the past, stratified in memory as a form of narrative. This category of questions cannot, however, be totally excluded. Here again we meet the problem of ontology in the life story. If it is assumed—for hypothetical reasons—that every interviewee has one true and already-prepared life story, then all these questions would seem merely to disturb the narration. But if, on the other hand, we believe in the possibility of a certain contingency and of an "unfinishedness" in the stories, then the questions in this category might trigger new stories. Once more the problem lies in good timing: we should employ these "ethnographic questions" only after the story proper has finished.³⁷

The third strategy comes closest to the "life story" described by Burgos. To arrange and represent one's life, one needs a story, or, rather, several stories. We must focus now on problems concerning what questions, and what kind of questions, themes, and explanatory models each narrator includes in his or her story. A potential way of interviewing along these lines has been developed by Fritz Schütze and is "much used in recent German life history research." This method attempts to resolve the "validity problem," and has been developed "by making systematic use of the known regularities of communicative activity in story-telling, which unlike the interview, 'naturally' occur in social life."³⁸

THE NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

After the foregoing discussion my recommendation of a "narrative interview" is not perhaps surprising, but none the less we could not take it to be a complete solution. The extensive discussions about the conceptualization and study of narrative have revealed that it is an open-ended and inherently vague term. Schütze's "biographical narrative interview" proceeds through three stages. In the first stage, we expect the most original of the successive narratives as a reaction to "narrative stimulus."³⁹ The task of the interviewer is to be an active and supportive listener without disturbing the story.⁴⁰

In the second stage, two new categories of question are allowed: "immanent" questions, which correspond to the "ethnographic questions" discussed above; that is, the researcher may ask something further concerning themes and events already mentioned by the interviewee, using as far as possible the respondent's vocabulary. Only after that may the researcher ask questions germane to the research program ("thematic questions," as I have called them above). The third stage "draws on the informant's capacity as a theoretician of his/her life." The researcher starts from the explanations and background theories of the respondent's narrative account, and asks him/her to explicate these themes and to describe areas of experience.⁴¹ This I call the evaluative stage.

But where does the beginning of a political biography actually lie? In childhood, in family history or in the political socialization of the subject? Asking for "the life story from the beginning" is problematic here, because we may be employing explanatory models (such as the inclusion or exclusion of childhood or parents) which are influenced by different conceptions of "politics." Schütze's classification of questions is convincing; the term that needs to be elaborated here is "narrative stimulus." As every experienced interviewer knows, there is no direct relation between any "narrative stimulus" and "narrative answer," but a question may, in some cases, trigger an analytical or theoretical answer far from any simple chronological account. An analytical or theoretical question, in any case, could be answered with a long chronological story. Schütze seeks to control this ambivalence, so far as possible, through the careful timing of questions.

An examination of narrative structure might yield another perspective on this question of "narrative stimulus." Ricoeur has emphasized the concepts of plot and emplotment as important for the narrative and for the experience of time.⁴² He questions the separation of explanation and story:

If history is thus rooted in our ability to follow a story, the distinctive features of historical explanation must be regarded as developments at the service of the capacity of the basic story to be followed. In other words, explanations have no other function than to help the reader to follow further. . . . Explanations must therefore be woven into the narrative tissue. To narrate and to understand a story presupposes, then, the ability to "to extract a configuration from a succession."⁴³

Thanks to this configurational capacity, a narrative reveals more than a pure chronology of events. Ricoeur writes of an evaluative capacity comparable to that of the Kantian judgement.

How, then, should we understand the term "plot"? After criticizing structuralist attempts to "de-chronologize" the story, Ricoeur emphasizes the compellingly diachronic nature of the quest:

In this sense, the quest renders possible the plot, that is, the disposition of events capable of being "grasped together." The quest is the mainspring of the story, separating and reuniting the lack and the suppression of the lack. This quest, indeed, has been the crucial to autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical literature: "If Augustine's *Confessions* tell 'how I became a Christian,'" writes Ricoeur, "Proust's narrative tells 'how Marcel become an artist.' The quest has been absorbed into the movement by which the hero—if we may still call him that name—becomes who he is."⁴⁴

From this perspective we can construct an interviewing strategy which is based on recognized narrative functions, without presupposing any compulsion to proceed chronologically or any predetermined starting point. Thus two questions dominate my interviews: "How did you become a student activist (radical, communist, etc.)?" Or in relevant cases: "How did you become a former student activist?" In this way I try to explicate the turning points of the stories. Denzin has recently advocated a quite similar approach by emphasizing the importance of special moments, "epiphanies," in life stories.⁴⁵ However, concepts like turning point, epiphany and conversion are not identical in spite of their family resemblance.

But, as we already know, the story is told in the present situation, affected by future perspectives, and it is recounted as a construction for future life. That is why it appears reasonable to open the discussion by asking about a present relationship to politics; this offers the respondent the possibility of defining and conceptualizing "politics" in his or her own terms.

The outline of the "emplotted" interview could thus incorporate the following main questions:

Present Situation

1. What is your present relationship to politics?

The Plot

2. How did you become a student/political activist?
3. When and where did you find your own high point in the movement?
4. Which were the points of disappointment or resentment?
5. How did you become a former student/political activist?
6. Did you experience times that you could describe as "crises" in your development?

Special Themes

7. How did you experience discussion concerning revolution and a vision of it?
8. How did you experience an organizational or "official" way of referring to the Soviet Union?

Evaluation

9. Have you felt regret for something you did during the time of the student movement? Do you feel any bitterness towards someone or something from those days? Do you ever long for something from the 1970s and the movement?
10. How do you see the continuities and breaks in your life from the 1960s to the present?
11. How do you evaluate the experience of the 1970s and of the student movement in your

life? Has your life got richer or poorer, metaphorically speaking? Did the movement close up or open out your life? What did it mean for any dreams you might have had for yourself?

Of course, this strategy has only been developed during my study, and very few interviews have been accomplished in such a pure form.⁴⁶ The worth of this approach was proved, paradoxically, in the wide variety of answers given to the plot-questions. Some respondents gave a very complete and highly elaborated story from childhood to the present; others asked for new questions to help their recall. A renewal of the interview, when needed, provided relatively little new story material, only further evaluations and new details.

WHOSE BIOGRAPHY?

The strategy of the narrative interview solves problems arising from the differences between autobiography and biography. Ordinary people, or rank-and-file activists, seldom write their autobiographies. Yet these are essential for studying a student movement. I attempted to proceed from a biographical interview towards a more genuinely autobiographical result. The respondents were asked to tell their story just as they would have like to write their autobiography.

Despite all this, the final construction is the product of the researcher. Writing a memoir would be quite a different mental process from answering the questions of an interviewer. However, it would be naive to underestimate the capacity of a politically experienced respondent to oppose the interviewer and to present his or her own story—or at least, one version of it.⁴⁷ Mishler correctly emphasizes that the interview is “jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent.”⁴⁸ This position is still unsatisfactory. It is necessary to explicate all the relevant audiences, besides the interviewer, that the interviewee wants to address. In my case, I can perceive at least four different audiences:

1. The respondent him/herself.
2. Myself as interviewer.
3. Other former activists as a reference group.
4. The general public, “the next generation,” etc.

The role of the interviewer may be quite incidental to the speaker compared with other audiences. Or, in other cases, the interviewer may be the most relevant audience.⁴⁹

My purpose in conducting narrative interviews was not to concentrate on the narrative structures or styles of the stories, but to develop more intensively critical approaches to analyzing the material. Contrary to the naturalistic-romantic way of conducting and reading interviews as plain testimonies, this strategy opens up much wider possibilities for critical readers. Rhetoric, grammar, narrative structures, themes included and themes excluded, become possible subjects of study. Charles Griffin suggests an interesting solution by analyzing the "rhetoric of coherence" in conversion narratives. Because of this unifying rhetoric, conversion stories, while presenting very dramatic turns in life, may, at the same time, be the most coherent life stories.⁵⁰

The importance of this approach for biographical study in particular and for political research in general is summed up by Burgos:

I believe that life stories are the best material—and perhaps the only one—on which to base research into the way in which the individual builds his social self-image, as the living product of the interaction of several kinds of tension.⁵¹

If necessary, the word "political" could be substituted for "social," following Murray Edelman's analysis of social phenomena as political constructions.⁵² Narrative analysis makes it possible to study the process of constructing one's own life, life story and social or political self-image. It reveals what is problematic about the "auto" in political biography.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, the program of the International Sociological Association World Congress, July 9-13, 1990, in Madrid, Spain.

² See Philip Abbott, *States of Perfect Freedom: Autobiography and American Political Thought* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

³ One exception has been Donatella della Porta, who interviewed former terrorists; see her unpublished paper "The Persistence of Commitment in High-risk Political Organizations: The Case of

Left-wing Underground Groups in Italy," presented at the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions, April 10-15, 1989, in Paris, France, at the Workshop "The New Politics and the New Middle Classes."

⁴ Ahti Karjalainen and Jukka Tarkka, *Presidentin ministeri* (Helsinki: Otava, 1989), p. 9.

⁵ Ahti Karjalainen, "Ahti Karjalainen antaa Väyrykselle synninpäästön," interview in *Iltalehti* (September 8, 1989).

⁶ See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); and Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, tr. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

⁷ Martine Burgos, "Life Stories, Narrativity, and the Search for the Self," *Nykykulttuurin tutkimusyksikön julkaisuja* (University of Jyväskylä), vol. 9 (1988), p. 14.

⁸ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67-72. This problem is extensively discussed in Lejeune's essay "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," see Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, pp. 185-215.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, Trans. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 17. See also Heidi I. Stull, *The Evolution of the Autobiography 1770-1850: A Comparative Study and Analysis* (New York: Peter Lange, 1985).

¹⁰ De Man, *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 68. H. Porter Abbot says correspondingly: "Autobiography's notorious formal turbulence also derives from its status as personal action. By 'formal turbulence' I mean that the classics of the genre are strikingly unlike each other." "Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for Textual Categories," *New Literary History*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1988), pp. 600-3.

¹¹ Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research*, vol. 54, no. 1 (1987), p. 11. See also his *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1990), pp. 99-138.

¹² Ricoeur and Carr have discussed the relation between time and narrative, albeit in different ways. Ricoeur maintains the ubiquity of narratives but still theorizes a "pre-narrative structure" in the elements of experience. For Carr this poses the very distinction between "real experience" and "culturally provided rules for story-telling," which Ricoeur had himself disavowed. Carr does not agree that the narrative "as a literary artifact produced by historians reads into the reality of the past a narrative structure that the past does not 'really' have." But in stressing the continuity between narrative and everyday life Carr seems to neglect different levels of narrative and culturally formed ways of telling one's

life story. In such narratives the "original experiences"—irrespective of whether they were narrative or not—are used only selectively or are overlooked altogether. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 13.

¹³ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 294.

¹⁴ Georges Gusdorf was one of the first to discuss this feature of the autobiography; see his "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 28-48.

¹⁵ Daphne Patai, "Constructing a Self: A Brazilian Life Story," *Feminist Studies*, no. 1 (1988), p. 147. Correspondingly, Dan P. McAdams has equated one's own life-story with personal identity. See his *Power, Intimacy and the Life Story* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Burgos, "Life Stories," p. 24.

¹⁷ See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Center for Psychological Studies*, no. 14, ed. R. J. Parmentier and Greg Urban (Chicago: Center for Psychosocial Studies, 1987). Bourdieu continues the tradition of Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, who developed the "argumentative model of the person" in the 1950s; Bourdieu repeats their views quite directly. See their *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971).

¹⁸ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," pp. 1-2. Gusdorf recognized this tendency earlier: "[T]he original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization." ("Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," p. 41).

¹⁹ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," p. 2.

²⁰ Bourdieu, "The Biographical Illusion," p. 5. The proper name happens to be a key concept for Lejeune and his "autobiographical pact"; see Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, pp. 10-21.

²¹ The traditional reference to Benjy as an idiot gives an erroneous picture of his mental capacities. He is not stupid or without talent, but is rather a shattered personality, lacking the coherence expected in a narrator.

²² That emphasis is even more evident in Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*.

²³ Kosonen, Päivi, "Omaelämäkerran innovaatiot: Nathalie Sarraute'n Lapsuus näennäisenä omaelämäkertana," *Synteesi*, vol. 3 (1989), p. 75-83.

²⁴ See Dan McAdams, *Power, Intimacy and the Life Story*, and Walter R. Fischer, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

²⁵ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, "Qualitative Research Methods Series 17" (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 62-3.

²⁶ Ahti Karjalainen died on 7 September 1990, about six months after I wrote the first version of this article.

²⁷ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, p. 27.

²⁸ Elliot G. Mishler has thoroughly discussed these problems in his *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

²⁹ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, pp. 295-6.

³⁰ Stull, *Evolution of the Autobiography*, pp. 50-68.

³¹ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 295.

³² Burgos, "Life Stories," pp. 14-15.

³³ Ingeborg K. Helling, "The Life History Method: A Survey and A Discussion with Norman K. Denzin," *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 9 (1988), pp. 243.

³⁴ Matti Kortteinen, *Lähiö: Tutkimus elämäntapojen muutoksesta* (Helsinki: Otava, 1982), pp. 295-314.

³⁵ See Roy Schafer, "Narration in the Psychoanalytic Dialogue," *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). pp. 25-49.

³⁶ Helling, "Life History Method," p. 223.

³⁷ Helling, "Life History Method," pp. 222-3. Professor Werner Fuchs, from the Fernuniversität Hagen, Germany, has kindly given me further information on Schütze's methodology in personal communication.

³⁸ See James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979).

³⁹ By the term "narrative stimulus" Schütze refers to a highly standardized and controlled opening question. Basically, the interviewer is not allowed to give any further information or even different wording of the question; see note 36 above.

40. To avoid disturbing the story may be the most demanding task of the interviewer. Mishler has analyzed the exact communication between interviewer and interviewee and notes his own recurrent interruptions. I can clearly see these problems in my own material, too, but cannot discuss them at any length here; see Mishler, *Research Interviewing*, pp. 35-65.

⁴¹ Helling, "Life History Method," p. 223.

⁴² See Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," *On Narrative*, ed. Mitchell, pp. 165-86; *Time and Narrative; Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*.

⁴³ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 278.

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, p. 285.

⁴⁵ See Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, pp. 70-3. Correspondingly, McAdams employs the concept of "nuclear episodes" to describe these decisive and problematic experiences; see *Power, Intimacy and the Life Story*, pp. 133-72.

⁴⁶ Questions "as text" and the actual interviews are two different things, as Mishler points out. In my case even the "questions as text" are a joint product of interviewer and interviewees; see *Research Interviewing*, pp. 37-44. Schütze would not have allowed such changes in wording or the interviewing process.

⁴⁷ Burgos, "Life Stories," pp. 17-18.

⁴⁸ Mishler, *Research Interviewing*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ A passive interviewer is not sufficient for a solution to this problem. Note that psychoanalysts also minimize their speech and even sit behind their clients but are, nevertheless, the audience proper.

⁵⁰ Charles J.G. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Forms in Conversion Narratives," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 76 (1990), pp. 152-63.

⁵¹ Burgos, "Life Stories," p. 25.

⁵² See Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).