3 A Reflection Upon Interpretive Research Techniques: The Problem-Centred Interview as a Method for Biographic Research

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While the method of the problem-centred interview or PCI has been widely used by social researchers writing in German, a large part of the international scientific community is not yet acquainted with this strategy of data collection and analysis. The most significant contribution of the PCI to qualitative research methods is its coherent combination of different interviewing styles within one interview session: an open narrative at the beginning is followed by a thematic interview and the collection of socio-statistical information at the end. This paper gives an overview of the theoretical foundation and the different stages of the PCI by introducing an example of how it is carried out within a research project on biographical orientations in migration processes. Finally, the PCI is compared with other types of biographical data analysis, discussing both its advantages (such as linking the analysis to the development of qualitative typology building) and disadvantages (eg. high demands on the interviewed person) and giving an overview of the scope and limits of this interpretive method.

Introduction

The problem-centred interview focuses on reconstructing individual and group-specific forms of meaning. It approaches a certain theme from differing methodological angles by combining an open narrative beginning with prepared questions and other forms of data collection in later stages of the interview. This method tries to bridge the individual constructions of meaning on the one hand and the influence of societal conditions on the other hand.

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During the last few years the problem-centred interview has been widely used within different areas of social research.[1] Research questions within varying research areas, such as sociology of medicine (Angermeyer et al., 1999; Badke, 2001; Dworschak and Lehner, 2001), gender studies (Buchinger et al., 2002; Pech, 2002), environmental studies (Pregernig, 2002) and social work (Schmidt-Grunert, 1999), have been tackled this way. At the moment, the PCI is probably one of the most frequently used types of qualitative interviewing and analysis used in the German social sciences. One trait that these heterogeneous research interests have in common is that they all emphasise the perspective of individuals by analyzing action orientations or important personal experiences. They are all trying to take into account the specific structuring conditions (along the lines of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory), under which interviewees gain experiences, incorporate them into their action orientations and reflect on them. Although the PCI has become such a 'popular' qualitative research method in German sociological literature, the methodological implications of the PCI have not yet been discussed in much detail.

The actual use of the PCI will be portrayed by describing a research project that focuses on mobility patterns of Austrians who emigrated to New York City after 1965. Using a biographic research approach, the life histories of 26 persons were collected by means of the PCI to reconstruct migration patterns within their accounts. The main result of this research project, which was carried out between 1998 and 2001[2], is that three forms of action orientation[3] can be distinguished to describe these biographical patterns of mobility: the orientation towards personal relations, the orientation towards occupational matters, and the orientation towards values of self-fulfilment.

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[2]   For a detailed description, see Scheibelhofer 2001, 2003c.

[3]   The types of action orientations are to be understood in the sense of the Weberian 'ideal types', meaning that they are analytical instruments to compare empirical incidents. Ideal types themselves do not have to be empirical cases but rather represent extreme theoretical angles for the research question at hand (see Weber, 1988, 1922; Haas and Scheibelhofer, 1998).

The Method of the PCI

Based on the methodological research strategy of the Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), Andreas Witzel (1982, 1996, 2000) developed the problem-centred interview for a project focusing on the biographies of young people and their experiences with unemployment immediately after leaving school.

Grounded Theory is deemed to be today's "basic strategy in interpretive sociology" (Lueger, 2000, p.223). Yet during the last few years, researchers have frequently pointed out and criticised its positivistic stance (see for example Charmaz, 2000; Denzin, 1994; Richardson, 1993). Hence, Kathy Charmaz (2000) proposed a social constructivist take on Grounded Theory, which also serves as the methodological starting point of this paper. Although Charmaz is taking on a position of interpretive sociology, she does not draw from the phenomenological works (eg. Schwandt, 2003 for and overview; Schütz, 1967) or the methodological works of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge.[4]

Another shortcoming of the Grounded Theory as it was described by Glaser and Strauss is that it does not provide any specifications about the methods used to generate data (see Lofland, 1971). Thus, researchers have to turn to other sources to inform themselves about data gathering methods such as interviewing methods or participant observation. Moreover, researchers frequently do not ask themselves whether the method of data collection will allow an analysis with GT coding strategies. The PCI relies on the basic assumptions of Grounded Theory but also exemplifies the actual process of data gathering and analysis, both with regard to the research interest in individual people's past experiences and their incorporation into action orientations.

Based on the research strategy of Grounded Theory, the PCI combines different types of interviewing, such as structured interviewing (Russell, 1996; Fontana and Frey, 1998) and in-depth interviews (Legard et al., 2003). Within the structured interview, the interviewer does not deviate from a question's specific wording so as to ensure the uniformity of the interview administration. The topical interview (Mayring, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995) leaves a little more freedom to the researcher during the interviewing sessions; here, the main questions are prepared in advance and asked according to the interview situation. By carrying out in-depth interviews, the social scientist seeks to encourage free and open responses. Thus capturing the interviewees' perceptions, the researcher can then try to reconstruct the meaning of an experience from the interviewees' point of view (see for example Marshall, 1999; Seidman, 1998).

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[4] For an overview (in English) of the ongoing German debates see Schnettler, 2002.

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The PCI builds upon a specific type of in-depth interview. The narrative interview (Schütze, 1977; Kohler Riessman, 2002) is based on the idea that the structure of narration represents the structure of the biographical processes of life experiences.[5] Thus, the interview is carried out and analysed under the premise of giving the interviewed person the utmost amount of freedom in arranging themes and choosing between different ways to present their own story. The interviewer's task is to provide for a situation in which such open communication is possible, to listen attentively and to direct the account as little as possible (see Schütze, 1977).

As each type of interview enables the researcher to take on another research perspective, the PCI combines structured and in-depth interview methods: the open beginning of the narrative interview is followed by a more structured guideline interview[6], asking open-ended questions already prepared before the actual interview session. This part allows greater emphasis on specific aspects of a certain phenomenon, which might not be tackled by interview partners in a classic narrative interview setting. A short questionnaire, which asks for socio-statistic data relevant to the analysis, concludes the interview session.

First Phase: Preparation of the Interviews

Before the interviews can be carried out, an intensive phase of *literature review* needs to be conducted regarding the specifics of the social phenomenon to be analysed.[7] Based on this review, an *interview guideline* containing a pre-formulated entry question is drawn up. For the project on Austrian immigrants, the opening question was: "Could you please tell me everything that is connected to your coming to New York and how your life went ahead since then? Please take as much time as you want for doing this and tell me every detail that is, in your opinion, connected to your living in New York".

For consecutive questions, only the themes to be tackled within an interview are written down in the interview guideline. This guideline is not to be used as a reading help for the interviewer, but as a reminder that should be used – if at all necessary – at the end of the interview. Otherwise the interview situation might turn into a question-answer game that will not allow extensive narrations. By using the guideline merely as a memory aid, the interviewer

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[5]   See as an example Fritz Schütze's (2003) analysis of an interview with a migrant.

[6]   Some authors use the terms 'topical' or 'thematic interview' instead of 'guideline interview'.

[7]   It should be noted that the term "problem" in the naming of the method also encompasses the analysis of any sort of life event or experience that represents individual life realities.

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remains flexible enough to follow the interviewee's story line. The interview guideline may also be changed if the results of the analysis hint at new directions within the research interest. Nevertheless, the interview guideline makes it possible to compare the case-studies with one another because the same issues have been brought up in the interview. During the research on Austrian immigrants, it proved to be very helpful to carry out the first three interviews in a very open manner and then analyse them extensively before finalising the interview guideline. This initial phase also helped to formulate an adequate opening question for the interviews that would elicit an account of the interviewed persons according to the research interests.

During this stage of research, a *short questionnaire* is developed as well. It is meant to be completed at the end of the interview together with the interviewed person and involves socio-statistical data such as age, profession or marital status. Depending on the research interests, it may also contain other questions like prior mobility experiences (as in the case of the immigration project), etc. In order to keep the more unstructured part of the interview as unrestricted as possible, it is advisable to fill out this questionnaire at the very end of the interview session.

Second Phase: Conducting the Interviews

The interview starts with an opening question, as described by Fritz Schütze (1977), for the narrative interview. Its formulation should stipulate a narration without intervention by the interviewer. The question ought to set the stage for a longer story-telling episode within the interview setting. The techniques of the narrative interview (see Kraimer, 1983) call for a skilled and well-trained researcher, as the interviewer should encourage the interviewees to dwell in their own ideas without making any substantive contribution such as asking additional questions, proposing varying possibilities to answer, etc.

After the interviewed person has finished his/her narration in reply to the initial question, Andreas Witzel suggests the use of the following techniques: general and specific probing ("Sondierungen") and ad-hoc questions. In my opinion, the terminology employed at this point is either unclear or in fact implying research techniques that may even endanger the mode of communication established so far. Therefore, I would suggest we stick with the terms already mentioned: the first technique of general probing corresponds to the term of "immanent" questions: Schütze (1977, p.35) coined this expression to denominate all the interviewer's interventions that are directly linked to the respondent's narration. The only difference that may come to mind when reading Witzel's texts is that he proposes to leave this stage of the interview faster than in a narrative interview. Yet I believe that researchers should try to stay in this phase despite the fact that not all social researchers might be

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knowledgeable about the techniques of active listening.[8] Nevertheless, this initial phase gives an interviewed person the most freedom in structuring social subjects and experiences according to his/her situation. It should also be pointed out that these passages are especially helpful for an analysis later on: one and the same experience is never told in the same way and these differences allow for a double-check of the constructed hypothesis within the analysis later on. Therefore, these passages can indeed help us assess the quality of our own analysis. After clarifying all aspects with regard to this initial account, "exmanent" questions are introduced by the researcher, in which he/she puts forward the questions prepared in the guideline. Andreas Witzel calls then *ad-hoc questions*, although this term is misleading in the sense that they are not invented on the spot but have been drawn up beforehand.[9]

Andreas Witzel also mentions two other techniques: confrontations and questions of understanding. While I used questions of understanding in later phases of the interviews, confronting interview partners after an open interview beginning seemed rather problematic: I believe that the interview partners could easily feel tricked into a situation where in the beginning they are encouraged to detail their accounts as much as possible, only to have a hardly known researcher point out to them later on that their narration is not logically consistent. Besides ethical problems, there is also a methodological difficulty: the danger of changing the communication into a setting where the interview partner feels compelled to defend himself/herself. This is indeed problematic as in the following analysis of the interview we can only speculate about the structural implications of vindications that go beyond their situational meaning.

During the final stage of the interview, Witzel suggests that the interviewer should summarise the main conclusions. In the aforementioned project, this technique was used elaborately to shape the last part of the conversation. The interviews benefit significantly from this approach, as interviewees might continue to give accounts of their experiences and elaborate on crucial episodes in their lives. Directly after the interview session, the researcher writes a postscript, describing the complete interaction and also reconstructing the narrative course by taking into account incidents not recorded on the tape. In the migration project, I also wrote extensive memos to compare each interview with those I had already analysed. The comparative axis is thus implemented at a very early stage within the PCI, which makes it easier to identify new venues of research as well as new research partners that are congruent with the research focus.

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[8]   Active listening and its techniques are explained in detail in Wengraf (2001).

[9]   The researcher, however, is free at any time to venture for other questions within an interview setting if his/her theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978) should lead him/her to do so.

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Third Phase: Interpreting Problem-Centred Interviews

This method has been developed for research designs ranging from in-depth case studies of young people to typologies of exposure to unemployment (Witzel, 1996, 2000). But PCIs can certainly be carried out in other research designs as well. In the research project on Austrians emigrating to New York City, an ethnographic approach has been chosen which includes participant observation and document analysis into the research process. All accessible material that could be used to get a dense picture of migration experiences from the perspective of the individual was included. The results of the analysis showed that the persons I had interviewed did not perceive themselves as migrants. They saw themselves as privileged foreign citizens as opposed to classical migrants. Most of them had never decided to leave their country of origin for good, but specific circumstances had led them to remain in the US. It turned out that the main reason for their decision to stay in New York can be found in three basic action orientations: personal and family relations, work and career opportunities, and the orientation towards self-fulfilment were reconstructed as crucial for settling in the US (for a detailed description see Scheibelhofer, 2003c). These results were obtained using the analytical tools of the PCI: each interview was transcribed and analysed immediately after the session whenever possible. The analyses of the single cases were carried out according to the coding strategies in Grounded Theory (see for example Strauss, 1994) and then used to construct theoretical concepts. With the research interests in mind, these concepts are finally re-shaped and put into relation to each other at the same time.

Within the PCI, analyses of single cases are also oriented towards biographic life courses. With the help of an action model, Andreas Witzel reconstructs and interprets each single phase of an individual biography. This "*ARB model*" (**a**spirations – **r**ealizations – **b**alances) is based on the assumption that each phase of the narration contains the wishes, imaginations and expectations of the interviewed person. During the phase of realization, these visions become part of their life, are re-imagined, or dismissed. In a step the researcher reconstructs an evaluation of this biographic phase. Within the analysis of Austrian emigration, it seemed useful to explicitly add a first step to this framework: a description of general living conditions under which a biographic phase unfolds was added to the steps described by Witzel. References to such conditions can also be found in his writings, although not systematically within the analysis. The advantage of having introduced this analytic step is that we can now make specific cross-references between general living conditions and biographic phases within each case study, which can in turn be compared to other biographies.

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The use of such an analytic model has one more significant advantage which has not yet been discussed in methodological literature: critics of biographic research often argue that in studies based on narrations human memory fails too often to be trusted on a scientific level (for a detailed discussion of this matter see Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999). The PCI, however, does not aim at reconstructing the "true story" of a biography, but rather looks for evaluations from the perspective of the moment of the interview. Thus, Andreas Witzel's writings about the PCI do not imply that we get direct access to past realities by collecting and interpreting life histories, but precious insights into life choices and life chances from the point of view of a person at the specific moment of an interview.

In reference to the analysis as it was carried out in the project at hand, it ought to be noted that as more and more data was included into the analysis comparisons between the cases also became increasingly important as the research project progressed. At the same time, relevant literature was reviewed and put in relation to preliminary findings by means of constant memo writing (in total, more than 200 memos were written in the aforesaid research project). One example of such theoretical considerations would be the interest in transnational migration while doing the field work in the US. For half a year, diagrams and memos were interspersed with thoughts and ideas about possible links between my field work and transnational migration literature. In the end, though, I concluded that this theoretical lens could not have explained the crucial part of my findings. Therefore, in order to make sense of the analysis and put it into a broader sociological context, I decided to focus on the three concepts already mentioned and on the idea of individualisation.

Each of the three concepts corresponds to one of the three action orientations I identified from the data I had gathered. In a second step, the main features of each action orientation are explained by using all the collected data. The different types of combined action orientations are discussed here as well. The study ends with the conclusion that migration from Western European countries should also be considered and discussed more seriously – not only because of its quantitative importance but also for its social forms, which are still mostly unknown.

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Advantages and Limitations of the Problem-Centred Interview

The following table gives an overview of the different methods combined within the PCI. The colours indicate the mix of methods applied in the problem-centred interview (red for the narrative interview, blue for the semi-structured interview, and green for the innovative parts introduced by the PCI itself).

Table: Overview of Interview Types and Applications

Type	Setting	Role of Interviewer	Question Format	Mode of Interpretation	Purpose
Narrative interview	Arranged but informal	Passive but interested and engaged	Prepared opening question, very unstructured	Linguistic, biographic-comparative	Phenomeno-logical, latent structures
Problem-Centred Interview	Arranged but informal	Gradually changing from passive to intervening	Prepared opening question and shortlist of themes, socio-statistical data sheet	Case analysis, ARB-model coding (GT)	Developing theories on a meso-level
Semi-structured interview	Informal or formal	Strongly intervening	Pre-formulated questions (open-ended and closed)	Thematic analysis, coding (GT)	Open-ended testing of hypothesis

The description of each of the three types of interviewing summarises the purpose of the considered methods. The PCI, for example, is no longer just limited to biographic research. It also seems to be a suitable method for a variety of other research areas if the focus of research is on the analysis of individual reconstructions and their structuring conditions. A review of the studies employing the PCI suggests, however, that this method is often used by researchers without reflecting upon its exigencies. Besides that, Andreas Witzel's writings do not really point to all the discrepancies that have to be overcome when working with the PCI. Yet despite all that, the PCI has clearly become a widely used qualitative interview method in German applied sociological research within the last few years. To sum up, there are a couple of reasons for this "success".

    The method of the problem-centred interview builds upon existing expertise without pressing the interviewed persons into preformed answering

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modes. Additionally, the PCI uses some elements of the narrative and the semi-structured interview during the phase of data collection. An open beginning, for instance, enables the interviewee to structure the content of his/her talk. The researcher's expertise regarding the phenomenon to be studied is integrated in the further interview situation through the use of an interview guideline.

Compared to the narrative interview according to Schütze (1977), the interviewer is thus more flexible in a PCI setting. He/she is able to lend more structure to an interview if the communicative skills of the interviewee do not permit an extensive narrative phase. Furthermore, the analytical framework also takes into consideration the influences of societal structures on the interviewed person and makes it possible to reconstruct the individual perspective of the actor.

All the same, there are still some serious downsides and limitations to the method of the problem-centred interview, which are often neglected in the empirical literature.

This type of interview places great demands on the interviewer, who is expected to skilfully introduce three different interview styles in one session: after an open beginning, a more structured thematic part is followed by a socio-statistical data sheet. The continually changing mode of communication may cause various exigencies: the interviewer has to be well trained to know how long to stick with the narrative part of the interview and not to abandon it too early. He or she also has to guide the interviewed person from one phase into the next, meaning that the interview situation is even more complex than it is described in the pertinent literature on qualitative interviewing. After the interview, researchers are confronted with the question of how to interpret the collected data, since it was accrued under varying circumstances, which in many cases influenced one another. Such a mix of methods clearly presents a dilemma: what kind of analysis should be considered as adequate, for instance, and how can the findings of the narrative part be related to those of the prepared questions? Finally, the different aspects of team work come into play as well: data collection and analysis are carried out simultaneously. Based on (preliminary) findings, the empirical work is continually redirected. It is thus not advisable to outsource interviewing and/or interpretational work like it is often done in applied research.

Many social scientists looking for a suitable method to carry out their research projects tend to be enticed by their first impression of the PCI as being an "easy-to-use" and fast method. As it has already been pointed out, the exigencies of this method are considerable and have not yet been discussed thoroughly. Yet despite unrealisable associations on the side of researchers who are using the problem-centred interview, this method can still open up new venues in qualitative interpretive empirical work, which in turn may lead to a more serious – and much-needed – reflection upon methodology.

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