THE NARRATIVE INTERVIEW AND THE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AS METHODS OF EVALUATION - ADVANTAGES, POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

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Abstract:

Using arguments and concrete examples, he shows that the narrative interview is also an important evaluation method that should not be underestimated. The analysis shows that the narrative interview technique follows the principles of openness, freedom of the interviewee, listening to the interviewer and, above all, spontaneous storytelling. It is noteworthy that it not only allows us to build a bridge between evaluators and stakeholders but also to gather detailed information and different stakeholder perspectives on the evaluation questions.

Keywords: evaluation; evaluation method; narrative; narrative interview; opportunities

1. Introduction

One of the characteristics of qualitative research compared to quantitative research is its broad spectrum of methods, *„different methodological variants"* (cf. Döring/Bortz 2016, p. 367). These include the narrative interview and narrative analysis, which are among the best-known methods in the field of qualitative social research in Germany today (cf. Loch/Rosenthal 2002). Evaluation research is no exception. More and more of these methods are being used here - in the context of project and programme evaluation. However, some questions remain unanswered, namely the questions to know: What added value can narrative interviewing and narrative analysis bring to the evaluation context? Is their use in this field always obvious and practical? This article attempts to answer these two questions by analysing the use and benefits of these methods in evaluation, as well as the challenges associated with them. In doing so, we contribute to the discourse on evaluation methods by bringing in the perspective of narrative interviewing and narrative analysis.

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1.1 Theoretical framework and general information about the narrative interview and narrative analysis

The literature on qualitative research shows that the narrative interview and narrative analysis were first developed and introduced in German-speaking countries in the mid-1970s by Fritz Schütze in the context of research on municipal decision-making and power structures (Schütze, 1977). It was later applied to biographical research by researchers such as Wolfram Fischer, Gabriele Rosenthal and Harry Hermanns. This method is based on the assumption that it is possible to reconstruct experiences or life stories through narration. Narrative theory is the basis for this. Theoretically, it can be placed in the context of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and the sociology of knowledge (cf. (Vgl., Schütz, 1983, Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen 1973).

According to Schütz, the following approaches were decisive for its development:

- „*the constitutive contribution of language to the creation, maintenance and change of social reality*", for example, the "*communicative, interactive shaping of social action through the linguistic system of symbols*",
- the "*codification of social reality through linguistic classification*".
- the "*storage of everyday knowledge in typifications through the implicit dictionary of everyday colloquial language*" and
- the "*function of domination, suppression and repression*", but also the "*protest effect*" of linguistic formulations and codes (Schütze, 1987, p.413f).

It should also be mentioned that narrative analysis is strongly rooted in narrative theory. Furthermore, it is based on the fundamental assumption that a reconstruction of experiences or life stories can take place through narration. In order for narratives to emerge, mechanisms that Schütze calls narrative constraints should be taken into account. The three narrative constraints are as follows:

1) **Detailing:** Detailing refers to the interviewee's request for a detailed account of information. This means that the event or life experience should be told as it happened. It should be plausible, understandable and rich in detail. It is about striving for plausibility.

2) **Structure:** Here, the interviewees should try to structure their life story logically on their own. First, they should describe the initial situation, then unfold their narrative and finally tell the middle events up to the end.

3) **Establishing relevance and condensation:** Due to the time constraints of the narrative, interviewees are often asked to emphasise key points, highlight moments or insist on the essentials, thus giving the story a consistent and sensual, harmonious form.

The narrative interview has a long tradition in qualitative research. It is one of the oldest research methods for recording people's experiences, life stories or subjective experiences. This is done in the form of narratives and in connection with a question. The narrative interview is a „*social science research method which encourages the informant to give a comprehensive and detailed account of personal events and related experiences in the*

given subject area" (Schütze, 1987, p.49). This means that the informant is encouraged to describe his or her life story or experiences in detail by means of a stimulus question. It is an „*uncontrolled conversation*" (Riemann, 2003) in which the interviewee allows his or her everyday communicative skills to flow freely without being interrupted.

The literature on narrative analysis is not as extensive as that on grounded theory. The main authors are Fritz Schütze and Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, among others, while authors such as Patrick Heiser (2016) and Kleemann, Krähnke, Matuschek (2013) add to it. Etymologically, the word narrative analysis is a compound word consisting of two composites, namely narration and analysis. In literary terms, it refers to the analysis of a narrative. From this first meaning, it follows that the method is narrative-oriented. Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr propose a complete definition of the term in their workbook:

> „*Narrative analysis is a method explicitly based on narrative theory. Different levels of meaning are distinguished by determining the relationship between different forms of factual representation on the one hand and the process depicted on the other. Interpretation consists of showing how the two are related to each other*." (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014, p.223).

This shows that narrative analysis deals with narratives by attempting to reconstruct, generate and record knowledge about people, groups of people and social structures or processes on the basis of formal and content-related aspects. It is an inductive approach in which researchers attempt to reproduce and understand human experiences, people's lives and processes in the context of a predetermined research question from a transcribed interview or document. This is done in a text-immanent way, in which paratextual elements of the text, such as the year of publication or the historical context, are irrelevant; only the internal aspects of the text are relevant. Narrative analysis thus aims to reproduce the meaning of structures and processes through people.

2. Characteristics of the evaluation

The word evaluation is on everyone's lips these days. It has become a buzzword in areas such as politics, education, the environment and health. So far, there is no single definition of the term. Its meaning also varies depending on the field or context. Stockmann makes this distinction clear in the following extract: „*In its broadest definition, evaluation means assessing the value of an object. This can be a product, a process, a project or a programme. In the scientific sense of the word, such an evaluation requires systematic procedures and data-based evidence to support an assessment*." (Stockmann 2004, p.2).

This article uses the scientific sense of evaluation. Evaluation here means the process-oriented assessment of an intervention/project based on scientific-empirical methods and criteria. The literature on evaluation shows that the field emerged in the

USA around 1990 (cf. Ulrich/Wenzel 2004) and is, therefore, relatively young and not yet firmly anchored in society. A look at the different evaluation approaches and assumptions reveals that evaluation is oriented towards practice, communication, usefulness, inclusion and assessment. These characteristics are presented in turn below.

2.1 A practical approach

After an intensive examination of the various assumptions of evaluation, it is concluded that evaluation is a pragmatic task in which society is involved. It is most often carried out in companies, organisations, associations or by politicians and decision-makers on specific projects or programmes in order to obtain information on how well or badly they are running and how effectively or ineffectively they are affecting those concerned (learning function so Stockmann 2004, p.2). It aims to improve, develop and monitor an intervention (Stockmann). It is usually carried out by analogy with the classic scheme of social research, which begins with the identification of a problem, followed by the formulation of questions, hypotheses and the use of social science methods to answer the questions posed. Kardorff claims that „*evaluation practice (...) is characterised by an eclectic variety of methods*" (Kardorff cited in Flick 2006). It should also be noted that evaluation is a form of action research. Indeed, at the beginning of an evaluation, the researcher should conceptualise his or her research, sampling and theoretical design. Taking on this role requires a high capacity for analysis and reflection, not only on the existing situation but also on the theory of the programme in question. This phase is followed by the fieldwork phase of data collection, processing and analysis. The practical orientation of the evaluation can also be explained by the fact that the results formulated by the evaluators must be as practical and implementable as possible.

2.2 Utility focus

As mentioned above, evaluation is not a task to be carried out outside society. Rather, it should be carried out for and with society. Its purpose is to change society by improving policies, projects and interventions. Therefore, the desire of evaluators is that the results are used by those affected, not left in a drawer. According to Michael Patton (2008), it is not only the results of an evaluation that need to be useful to target groups, but also the whole evaluation process. It should be designed to involve the different stakeholders and their interests. This will help to identify and build their capacities.

2.3 Communication and inclusion

In their essay, Katja Mruck and Günter Mey mention that „*(...) for qualitative social research, the participation of researchers and communication between researchers and research subjects must be seen as a constitutive element of the behavioural process that requires reflection*" (Mruck/ Mey 2005, p.10). If evaluation is to be seen as a process of understanding human behaviour in relation to an intervention or project using social science methods, then communication in evaluation is of great importance. Without communication, evaluation runs the risk of being unsuccessful. Successful evaluation

takes place in and through communication. Stockmann takes an in-depth look at the importance of communication in the context of evaluation. This is illustrated by the following text excerpt:

> „*Evaluations provide an opportunity for transparency and dialogue. When the results of an evaluation are made public, they facilitate dialogue between different stakeholders (donors, implementing organisations, target groups, other participants and those affected). On the basis of the results obtained, it is possible to jointly and transparently take stock of how successful the cooperation has been, where the greatest successes have been and where deficits have occurred, in order to draw conclusions for the design of future cooperation. In other words, every evaluation provides a basis for joint learning.*"
> (Stockmann 2004, p.4).

In this way, the evaluation makes it possible to establish a solid link between the different stakeholders of a project and to bring them together in a round table. This can be achieved through the workshops, training sessions and seminars that take place during an evaluation, to which as many stakeholders as possible are invited.

3. The narrative interview in the context of evaluation

This part of the paper first describes the advantages of the narrative interview (1). Then, the possibilities and limitations of the narrative interview in the context of evaluation are explained (2).

3.1 Structure and process of the narrative interview
The guide does not usually play a significant role in the narrative Interview. Many researchers (Schütze, 1983; Bohnsack, 2014; Rosenthal/Loch, 2002) describe the process of narrative interviewing in three phases, namely the opening phase, the questioning part and the evaluation. These phases are described below.

3.1.1 Opening phase
In this phase, the interviewer asks the partner autobiographical questions. The aim is to encourage the interviewee to tell all life stories at all stages. This narrative prompt (also known as stimulus) and the subsequent impromptu narrative (i.e. a spontaneous, unprepared narrative) form the core of the narrative Interview. According to Flick/Kardoff/Steinke, „*the core element of the narrative interview consisted of a freely developed impromptu narrative stimulated by an opening question - the 'narrative-generating' question*" (Flick *et al.* 2006, p.206). Typically, a narrative interview begins with open-ended questions such as „*Can you tell me when you first suspected something was wrong and what has happened since?*" During the initial narrative, the interviewee should not be interrupted but supported in his or her communication (through verbal and non-verbal reinforcement). The skills required of a good narrative interviewer include the ability to

build rapport and trust early in the interview, to be a very good listener throughout and to avoid interruptions.

3.1.2 The demand phase

The first phase usually ends with a narrative coda (e.g. „*That was it*"), and then the second part of the narrative interview begins, in which follow-up questions can and should be asked. For example, aspects that were only vaguely described in the previous impromptu narrative or that were unclear will be addressed. In order to make the relevant events, experiences or interpretations clearer, more understandable and plausible, they need further explanations or details. It is, therefore, worth asking detailed questions about individual aspects of the story. Regarding the necessity of asking questions, Schütze asserts that „*asking questions in the communication situation of the narrative in-depth interview has primarily the function of generating further narrative structures*" (Schütze 1977, p.30). At this point, the interviewer can refer back to the last narrative passages and thus give a new narrative impulse by asking the interviewee for further details or information on an aspect (e.g. „*What exactly was it like back then?*", „*Why don't you tell us more about it?*", „*What exactly happened then?*").

3.1.3 Balance sheet

The evaluation is the final phase of the narrative interview in which the interview is summarised. It is also the evaluation of the exchange between the interviewee and the interviewer. In this phase, the interviewer can also ask the interviewee for feedback and impressions about the interview and, at the same time, thank the interviewee for his or her willingness to participate. Now that the understanding and process of the narrative interview are clear, the questions arise: *What is the evaluation about? What characterises it?* These questions will be answered in detail in the following descriptions.

3.3 Use and limitations of narrative interviews in evaluation

The use of the narrative interview in the evaluation brings an added value that should not be underestimated. On the one hand, it allows for in-depth data collection and information enrichment. Indeed, the elements of the narrative interview method, such as openness, improvisation and listening to the interviewer, contribute to giving the interviewee the opportunity to structure his or her narrative, to describe it in as much detail as possible or argue it as he or she sees fit. "*(...) Furthermore, the elicitation of narratives is intended to make it possible to reproduce courses of action*". (Loch & Rosenthal 2002, p.1)

This allows a large amount of information to be obtained, as during the interview, they give their opinions, expressions, and even emotions and feelings that they have experienced during an intervention or project. This allows the researcher to find out how badly or well the project went or is going.

According to Patrick Heiser: *"Narrative interviews can be used to collect particularly authentic data."* (Heiser n.d., p.12) By encouraging detail, the narrative interview can

help the researcher not only to understand the constructions of meaning and identity of the various stakeholders but also to identify the different perspectives within a particular project, to capture the *"perspective of the acting and experiencing individuals and make it accessible for analysis."* (Gisela, 1997).

An advantage of the narrative method in evaluation is its focus on communication. Interviewing someone means communicating with them, talking to them, and exchanging ideas with them. Using such a method makes it easier to bridge the gap between the evaluators and the different target groups or stakeholders. It is a means of creating an atmosphere of trust in the evaluation context. It can often happen that the interviewee suddenly expresses his emotions, his sensitivity, in order to free himself. In this sense, the narrative interview has a therapeutic role.

Compared to other qualitative methods, Anderson/Kirkpatrick (2016) and Freeman (1998) find the narrative method more human-centred. One reason for this is the openness and freedom of the interviewees, as well as the minimal number of interruptions during the narrative. The use of this method in the evaluation is a way of humanising the evaluation, as it places the different stakeholders at the centre of the evaluation. At the same time, it allows their opinions, feelings and sensitivities about the intervention to be heard. The fact that they (the stakeholders) feel addressed by the evaluation increases their willingness to use and integrate the evaluation results.

The implementation of the narrative interview in an evaluation context is not a simple matter. It is very often influenced by many factors. At the company level, a hidden agenda can hinder the success of the narrative Interview. This may take the form of very limited access to different stakeholders (informants) and/or rigid hierarchies: Stakeholders refuse to take part in the Interview. Gisela explains: „*A prerequisite for the narrative interview is the willingness of the interviewees to talk about their lives, which is usually given with the consent to be interviewed*" (Gisela, 1997). If people are not willing to be interviewed, then the narrative interview is not feasible in such a context. Another challenge is that the interviewee's retrospective ability may be distorted, for example, due to memory problems, mental illness or brain problems. Or a lack of narrative skills on the part of the interviewee. In a narrative interview, however, the interviewee's aim is to let his or her life story flow freely and to provide as much detail as possible (cf. Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014).

4. Narrative analysis in the evaluation context

This part of the paper examines the conditions for using the method in evaluations (1). It also attempts to identify its uses (2) and benefits in the evaluation context, as well as its limitations (3).

4.1 Requirements for the use of narrative analysis
Compared to the other qualitative evaluation methods, narrative analysis is less flexible and more dogmatic. Its application depends on two parameters.

The first is the nature of the corpus. Since narrative analysis is strongly influenced by narrative theory, only 'longer texts' and texts with narrative features or with themes of narrative power are allowed in this method, where the speakers let their thoughts and arguments flow freely without any influence or intervention from the interviewer (cf. Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014). In fact, the text must contain a narrative representation in which social processes and interactions unfold. In this way, a '*symptomatic*' data analysis could be carried out, starting from the formal textual appearance of the data and providing a complete description of its sequence (Schütze, 1983, p.286). The narrative interview is the preferred data collection instrument in narrative analysis because of its narrative theoretical grounding. It should not be overlooked that it can also be used in newspaper articles and texts of counselling interviews. Applied to evaluation, the method can be used, for example, in a process evaluation of the social counselling of pupils in a particular secondary school, where instruments such as counselling sessions or narrative interviews are used to collect information. The second parameter that is very important in the choice of narrative analysis is the nature of the question. In addition, narrative analysis is well suited to analysing theoretical models of particular types of life courses, and groups of people based on particular social or biographical conditions. An example of a question might be: Are there crossroads in the biographies of adults in Germany? In addition, narrative analysis can also be used to address basic theoretical questions by formulating general statements based on specific groups of people. An example of this could be that graduates of the master's programme in evaluation can explain their knowledge of evaluation implementation processes and project management.

4.2 Benefits of narrative analysis in the context of evaluation

The narrative analysis method is a long process. It consists of six steps or strategies that are interrelated and sequential (cf. Schütze, 1983, p.286). These steps are described in the following.

4.2.1 Formal text analysis

This is not a pure textual analysis but rather a formal preparation of the text to be analysed. Here, the transcribed text is cleared of all '*large, detached pieces of text (...) that are not explicitly formulated indexically*' (Schütze, 1987, p.54) or non-narrative parts (descriptions, arguments) that have no reference to persons, situations, places, times and the chain of events presented. The cleaned text is then segmented according to formal and content-related aspects. To do this, the researcher focuses on framing elements ('*And then...*', '*after I now...*' etc.) or markers ('*eh*'), pauses, a change in intonation or narrative detail, the introduction of a new topic (cf. Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013, pp. 231ff.).

4.2.2 The structural description of the content

Schütze (1983) asserts that here, the researcher attempts to process the segmented narrative segments and bring out their function for the whole narrative by analysing the relationship between content and form on the basis of the question of what and how. According to Schütze, helpful formal elements could be, for example, linking devices (*'then'*, *'so that'*, *'because'*… etc.), markers of the flow of time (*'yet'*, *'already'*… etc.) or markers of necessary additional details (e.g. narrative breaks) (cf. Schütze, 1984, p. 286).

4.2.3 The analytical abstraction

In this step, the results of the structural content description, i.e. the individual segments, are systematically related to one another in order to reconstruct the overall process structure. From this, the *'overall biographical formation, i.e. the life-historical sequence of the experience-dominant process structures in the individual stages of life up to the currently dominant process structure, is worked out'* (Schütze, 1984, p. 286). In order to do this, the researcher must develop an abstract structural plan to describe the process and combine all the modes of action into an overall biographical structure. The following table recapitulates the four process structures described by Schütze.

Table 1: The four process structures (from: Kleemann *et al.*, 2013, p.89).

Structure of the process	Explanations
a. Institutional process pattern	Self-selected entry into an institutionalized biographical process and subsequent action in accordance with institutional guidelines (Schütze: "normative-objectified principle")
b. Biographical action pattern	Self-initiated and controlled development beyond institutionalized guidelines or expectations (Schütze: "intentional principle")
c. Progress curve	Getting caught up in a process in which external existential conditions determine the biographical course; loss of control by the subject (Schütze "principle of being driven")
d. Biographical transformation process	Transitional phase (usually following a negative trajectory) in which the subject regains the ability to act biographically due to changes in their options for action or their own perceptions and orientations.

4.2.4 Knowledge analysis

Here, the interviewee's theories or systematisations that he/she creates for his/her own life are analysed. The argumentative and evaluative parts are particularly interesting. Here, the researcher contrasts the logic of action with the logic of representation by asking the following questions: Does the narrator describe himself as he acted? Are there discrepancies between the biographical self-description and the actual course of the biography? (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013, p.237). These allow the function of the theories in relation to the process structure to be determined.

4.2.5 Contrastive comparison

In this step, researchers abandon the individual case in favour of a contrastive comparison based on different interviews. Schütze proposed two strategies for this,

namely minimum and maximum comparison. The use of either strategy depends on the cognitive interest of the pre-formulated research question. In the strategy of minimal comparison, the interviews are selected according to relevant structures, breaks and processes that are as similar as possible. The maximum comparison strategy attempts to form alternative structures, options for action and possible common elementary categories (cf. Schütze, 1983, p.288).

4.2.6 Construction of a theoretical model

Knowledge about individuals, groups of individuals and their biographies is built up in the form of a theoretical model. The elements or relevant categories of the analysis are systematically brought together in order to extract and report on *'process models of individual fundamental phases and building blocks of life courses in general or of the constitutive conditions and the structure of biographical formation as a whole'* (Schütze, 1983, p. 288). These six stages are not separable but occur in succession and complement each other.

Now that we have looked at how we can use narrative analysis in process evaluations, what are its benefits, and what challenges does it face in specific process evaluations? The following section attempts to answer these questions.

4.3 Utilisation and limitations of narrative analysis in process evaluations

Anyone doing empirical research is faced with the task of deciphering social phenomena and realities. However, they are unique, diverse, and complex, and they are difficult to grasp through simple reading. This is why it is important to have recourse to evaluation methods. The latter are considered as instructions, strategies and means to explain phenomena or realities. One of the specific characteristics of qualitative social research is its wide range of evaluation methods (Flick, v. Kardorff & Steinke, 2000). A distinction is made between reconstructive, hermeneutic, explorative, discourse-analytical and content-analytical methods. Grounded theory is now „*one of the most widely used approaches to qualitative social research worldwide*" (Stauss & Corbin, 1996, foreword by Legewie). The literature on qualitative social research suggests that this method has a competitive relationship with another, narrative analysis.

According to Loch and Rosenthal, narratives can be used to determine courses of action (cf. Loch & Rosenthal, 2002, p.1). It is, therefore, clear that narrative analysis, as the study of narratives, contributes to the reconstitution and understanding of processes. For this reason, narrative analysis is important for process evaluation. The use of this approach allows the evaluator to revive, reconstruct and explain action constellations and sequences, processes and events in their socio-structural context and conditionality because social processes, interactions, etc., only unfold in narratives. The various stakeholders and project participants are often involved in project evaluation. The use of this method will, therefore, „*(...) open up a view of discrepancies between action plans and orientations and the (partly externally determined) possibilities of action of the subjects*" (Kleemann *et al.*, 2013, p.105).

The fact that narrative analysis itself involves different procedures (6 steps) - the content and formal aspects combined through the structure of the narrative, the argumentation and the descriptions – *„enables [the evaluator] to gain a comprehensive, methodologically controlled access to the experienced social reality of the interviewees"*, but also to deeply experience the existing relationships between the different actors or participants of a project, as well as their interests and perceptions towards the project (ibid.). The method can also be used to test a theoretical model. Narrative analysis can be used to confirm or refute basic assumptions, particularly in the areas of education, pedagogy or social constructs. Apart from its added value and reconstructive function, the use of narrative analysis in evaluations is not always obvious and practical. According to Kleemann *et al.*, objects of study without a process or event character cannot be analysed with narrative analysis (ibid.). As this method places particular emphasis on elements such as narrative and action, there is a limit to its use in process evaluations, as not all data and documents used in evaluations always contain narrative features or do not have a narrative character. Evidence of this can be found in documents such as project flyers, terms of reference, policy documents, baseline data and monitoring data.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this paper was to analyse the contours of narrative interviewing and narrative analysis in the context of evaluation. In order to achieve this goal, the literature on the two methods and in the evaluation context was systematically selected and analysed using the method of document analysis. The popularity of the narrative method is due to its principle of openness, the freedom of the interviewee, the interviewer's ability to listen and, above all, the improvised narrative. Researchers using narrative interview techniques do not enter the interview in a fixed order but allow the interviewee to control the direction, content, and pace of the interview. It is the interviewee's report, and they decide what to say and what not to say. However, this method of data collection requires not only the willingness of the informants to talk without any inhibitions, but also their narrative skills and strength and, above all, their ability to reflect on past events in retrospect or to reconstruct them independently. For this reason, the use of this method in the context of evaluation is often not obvious. The use of narrative analysis in evaluations, in turn, depends on the presence of narrative features in the data material, which is not often the case in evaluations. The diversity of data (documents with narratives and documents without narratives) is often an inhibiting factor for the application of narrative analysis. Although these results are instructive, the use of this method requires a certain subjectivity on the part of the evaluators and is time-consuming due to its six steps. It can be concluded from the above that the two methods allow for an understanding of the interaction between people within the project, the reconstruction of the life story of the course of events, and are therefore well suited to process evaluations, evaluations of the history of the

creation and development of projects or programmes, because processes can be easily analysed through narratives. However, some questions remain unanswered, namely, What are the quality criteria for good narrative analysis? To what extent can narrative analysis be used in impact evaluations of development cooperation interventions? These questions could be explored further in light of the literature on evaluation practice and narrative analysis.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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