

TERESA PARCZEWSKA

MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY IN LUBLIN. FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGY
teresa.parczewska@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

On the Phenomenological Method of Narrative Interview as a Way of Learning about and Understanding a Child

*O fenomenologicznej metodzie wywiadu narracyjnego
jako sposobie poznawania i rozumienia dziecka*

SUMMARY

The aim of the current article is to present the advantages of the process of gathering, describing and interpreting qualitative data, collected by means of a narrative interview in a phenomenological perspective, and concerning the world of a child's life. The idea of narration as a way of understanding this world opens a range of possibilities for supporting children's personal development.

Keywords: qualitative research; phenomenology; a narrative interview; a child

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is not the only one, but one of the possible ways of conducting qualitative research. In a situation in which a scholar transfers the assumptions of philosophical phenomenology onto the grounds of pedagogy, they place in the centre of their interest the subjective experience of the world which a person inhabits. What becomes the constitutive goal of phenomenologically-oriented pedagogy is learning about the sensations and experiences of an individual as well as about the manner in which he or she sees the world. In a research project, a phenomenologist can employ numerous methods which will make it possible to acquire a rich and varied description of a specific experience, or a narration

about an experience. It seems that among the methods of collecting data an especially valuable one is that of narrative interview, developed by Schütze and collaborators in the early 1980s, anchored in the tradition of interpretive social science (Kopp, Lippitz 2001, p. 145). As Chase (2009, p. 3) stresses, narrative interview, as a special type of qualitative interview, is an area which is still in the stage of development.

An issue which is worth paying special attention to is insufficient knowledge concerning conducting narrative interviews with small children. Another problem is the methodological burden of qualitative research which causes many scholars to abandon it in favour of the quantitative approach, which guarantees reliability and credibility of the conducted studies (Krawczyk-Bocian 2008, p. 46). However, the idea of narration as a manner of understanding the world of a child's life opens numerous possibilities for supporting his or her personal development. As some researchers (Dryll, Cierpka 2011, p. 27) note, there is "a close relationship between the manner of speaking about oneself, one's life, the events one has come through, and the manner of understanding reality, perceiving oneself as a subject experiencing being-in-the-world". Offering a possibility of acquiring a deep understanding of narrators' experiences – mainly in the area of their relationships with the world – narrations also become helpful for the narrators in a constructive reorganisation of the events they talk about, as well as in searching for justifications for their behaviours and experiences. The aim of the current article is to present the advantages and limitations concerning the process of gathering, describing and interpreting qualitative data collected through narrative interviews in a phenomenological perspective.

THE ESSENCE OF NARRATION

A narrative (Latin: *narratio*), according to *Słownik języka polskiego* (1984, p. 285), is "an utterance aimed at presenting events in a determined temporal and cause-and-effect order, usually giving information about past facts"; it stands for storytelling, speaking, relating facts. Narrating – according to Alheit (2002, p. 103) – is a special term, emotionally charged; it is "a way of bringing the past to life". The course of narration determines the formation of the represented (told, portrayed) world: the plot, the characters, the background of the events, the narrative situation and the narrator himself/herself. In the past few years, many researchers representing various disciplines of humanities have been stressing the fact that "narration is a natural mental tool, making it possible to interpret the world in a manner which is understandable for human beings" (Filar 2013, pp. 65–66). Talking about something, people convey at the same time a lot of information about themselves. When telling a story, the narrator must name their experiences, or label them in the categories of the linguistic system they possess.

As Kvale (2011, p. 127) notes, "narrations are one of the most natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals attempt to order and convey meaning". At

the stage of creating a text, interpretation takes place, which can be modified for various reasons, as the narrator does not always want to tell the same version of events and the related sensations, or not to everyone. Narrations can also acquire a new shape due to the individual's new (subsequent) experiences, even when they concern the same fragment of the portrayed reality.

Intensified interest in narration has caused it to become a very popular, interdisciplinary term, described by many areas of science. The metamorphosis in understanding narration has caused it – as Łebkowska states (2004, p. 228) – to be considered in scientific thought as one “of the main anthropological-cultural categories, but at the same time it is treated by contemporary thinkers as either a basic cognitive structure or a set of cultural codes which endow activities with a form, order and direction”. Narrations are unlimited in their variety, and their analyses and interpretations make it possible to understand human life in its unique, subjective dimension; they allow the narrators to reinterpret their way of using the time they have lived through.

THE SPECIFICITY OF CHILDREN'S NARRATIONS

The French critic and theoretician of literature Roland Barthes (after: Burzyńska 2008, p. 23) wrote in 1966: “In this infinite variety of forms, [the narrative] is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative”. According to the scholar, narrative competence develops in very small children. A similar opinion is also expressed by Frank Kermode (after: Burzyńska 2008, p. 23), who claims that even the onomatopoeia *tick-tock*, which imitates the sound of the clock, can constitute a miniature model of a plot: “an organisation which humanises time by giving it a form”.

Research on children's narration to date shows basic trends and makes it possible to formulate the universals of its development. The most numerous studies were conducted on the basis of analyses of children's narratives related to picture stories. In the 1970s and 1980s, they focused on the produced text and usually attempted to determine the grammar of the story. Principles were identified which described the structure of narratives, considered in the dimension of macro- and microstructure (after: Ligęza 2004, p. 149). The mechanisms of constructing narratives, understanding and recreating them were formulated. For developmental psycholinguistics, the most important role is played by studies into the structure of stories, which is of universal nature. According to many researchers (Ligęza 2004; Bokus 1991), narrative competence develops gradually until the age of ten; however, an especially intensive development in terms of constructing stories by children takes place between the second and the seventh year of age (Rytel 2008, p. 265). When a child is born, they experience many events which allow them to get to know everything that happens in this world. Sequences of events constitute for them the elementary contents of the representations of experience, and by being repeated they

generate their representation in the mind. “The knowledge ordered in this manner is of procedural nature; it creates a canon of knowledge about the world. The representation of this knowledge is designated by the notion of *script*, in which the category of goal determines temporal-spatial sequences” (Ligęza 2004, p. 149). Knowledge systematised in this manner constitutes the potential of narrative thinking. The ability to talk about representations requires child’s creative invention, whose potential is activated through experimenting and which requires the integration of various types of knowledge and the understanding of social reality. As a narrative text is the result of ordering and explaining a specific individual experience, then a certain level of development of cause-and-effect thinking is necessary, as well as a child’s orientation in time and space (Bokus 2000, p. 13).

In the literature on the subject, there are two approaches developed in studying children’s narrative speech (Bokus 1984, 1991). In the case of the monologic approach, it is specific to conduct analyses of the text of the narrative from the point of view of its structure, or analysing its selected features or dimensions. One limitation of this position is ignoring the fact that a narrative text is not a product of discourse which is of monologic nature and overlooking the interactive nature of narration. One does not only talk about something, but also to somebody. McNamee (after: Rytel 2008, p. 265), making a reference to Wygotski’s theory, stresses that children’s narrative competences are developed in the course of interactions with adults who introduce them into the world of narration through organizing play and task situations. At the beginning, an adult helps the child to understand what he or she is to talk about and replace him or her in creating a narrative text, enabling him or her to participate in the narrative process by repeating the adult’s statements and asking questions. Subsequently, they encourage the child to speak through active listening (non-verbal behaviour), asking questions or completing the child’s narration with the necessary elements of the plot. It is usually a dialogic structure of narration between a child and an adult, whose activeness is very important for the construction of the narrative text by the child. A similar position is also presented by Shugar (2001, p. 85), who stresses that the natural source of the emergence of narration is the conversational context. Therefore, it is difficult to claim that a narrative text is the product of discourse of a monologic nature if it is created in the process of interactive discourse between a child and an adult. Recently, research into narration has been interested in the problem of children creating narrative texts in the course of peer interactions, where narration is treated as a joint achievement of the discourse between the speaker and the listener and in which the participants achieve their narrative goals and negotiate their own roles (Rytel 2008, pp. 266–267).

NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

Narrative interview is one of the methods of acquiring narration in qualitative research which is understood and described by researchers in various ways, depending on the adopted theoretical position. One of the classifications is presented by Chase (2009, pp. 26–30).

As the author states, the first approach – developed by some psychologists – focuses on the relationships between individuals' accounts of their lives and the quality of their lives. Therefore, in some situations these researchers, apart from collecting comprehensive information about one's life, make use of conventional psychological tests. Another position was developed by sociologists who focus on the work on identity done by people constructing their *self* in peculiar, constitutional, institutional, discursive and local cultural contexts. An individual moving around many various contexts is a situation which creates both limitations and the richness of possibilities of talking about oneself in the postmodern world. The researchers are interested both in *how* narrators tell their stories and *what* they say. Another position is also sociological. Its representatives focus more on intensive interviews concerning characteristic aspects of life than on conversations in specific organizational contexts. These researchers are interested in *how* people communicate meanings through various linguistic practices, how they elicit meaning from personal experiences in reference to culturally and historically determined discourses, and how they derive benefits from these discourses. The creators of the subsequent approach to narrative interview, called *narrative ethnography*, were anthropologists. As Chase notes (2009, pp. 26–30), this type of study requires a long-term involvement in the culture of the community. It focuses on a single individual or on a small number of people. The researcher and the studied subject are situated together in the same frame of “multivocal text focused on the character and process of the human encounter” (after: Chase 2009, p. 29). The last position is found in autoethnography, in which researchers observe themselves and their interactions with the others, through the prism of particular analytical perspectives. Researchers working with this approach write about, interpret or make their own narrations about culturally significant experiences. The aim of autoethnography is rather *to show* than *to tell*. Therefore, they sometimes oppose any kind of analysis, leaving the interpretation to the recipients of their *representations*.

From a practical point of view, choosing one of the presented positions is usually difficult. In the course of the conducted narrative interviews, their interpretation and presentation, researchers notice interconnections between different approaches. It also happens that they choose different perspectives depending on their approach to the narrative empirical material. A characteristic feature of narrative interview is “the conviction about the processual character of social reality, as well as about the fact that an individual shapes his or her own behaviour in the course of relations with the environment” (Kos 2013, p. 91).

THE SPECIFICITY OF AN INTERVIEW WITH A CHILD

Some researchers may have doubts concerning (preschool- and early school-aged) children's competent participation in a narrative interview. As practice shows, these doubts are unfounded, as can be attested by numerous studies on childhood (Kopp,

Lippitz 2001, p. 144) conducted in Germany (in the years 1988–1991). In the research procedure, qualitative field studies and case studies were tried out, employing, among others, narrative interviews. Heinzl (after: Kopp, Lippitz 2001, p. 160) quotes such a statement: “Whether the studied children will give narrative statements depends (...) mainly on the situation of the conversation, its circumstances and the manner of the-matising it”. Therefore, it seems that it is the researcher’s competence and not children’s age that is decisive for the effect of the employed method.

AN EXAMPLE OF COLLECTING EMPIRICAL DATA USING NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

I will present the method of collecting empirical data in the phenomenological paradigm with the help of narrative interview on the basis of the study conducted on nine-year-old children attending the third grade of primary school in Lublin. I chose children’s places in the spaces of the family home as the topic of the narration¹. The aim of the conducted study was to examine the narrators’ experiences connected with their place of residence. Narrative interview allowed me to gain thorough and profound knowledge of the studied fragment of reality. The information collected in this way let me describe this reality as well as to interpret and explain social phenomena related to the addressed issue. In the course of conducted interviews, I focused on the studied children, the statements they made, their impressions and the meanings given by them. My intention was to enter the world in which the children live – to perceive that world from their perspective, to discover it and thanks to that to discover the problems emerging from this world. I searched for answers to the questions about *how* social experience is created and *how* it is given meaning.

Before I started conducting interviews, I met the children a few times, trying to establish a closer contact with them – I talked with them about everyday, normal matters, not connected with the topic of the study. When I became convinced that the respondents feel secure in my presence – the greater the child’s sense of security, the more effective the research results – I asked them to make artistic works and take photos which would show their favourite places in the spaces of the house. With the help of their parents, all photos taken by the narrators were sent to my e-mail address. This material turned out to be very valuable in conducting interviews, as well as in analysing and interpreting them. It was a specific stimulus, a starting point for talking about one’s experiences, impressions and observations concerning the family home – a place which is so important for every person.

¹ Narrative interviews were conducted, analysed and interpreted as part of a monograph the author is currently working on.

After arranging adequately the surroundings in which the interviews were to be conducted, once again I gave the respondents very general information about the aim and subject matter of the conducted study². As it is crucial for the researcher to provoke and sustain narration, in the course of interviews I was trying to provide narrators with positive feedback through facial expressions, gestures or sparing approval. In children's statements, longer or shorter pauses occurred, during which children tried to remember various facts from the past or thought about what they could or would like to say. Once they finished their statement, I asked additional questions concerning narrations, such as: "Tell me more about it; How did it happen? What happened later?; What else can you remember about it?". I also referred to the photos taken by the respondents and the pictures they drew, which enlivened narration and enabled the children to go back to the previous subject or those aspects which had been mentioned in the story, but had not been developed enough. Looking through their photos and pictures, respondents usually talked with commitment about contents of their works and recalled various events related to them. The interviews conducted with the children were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed.

The children were asked open-ended questions. These were as follows:

1. How do you understand the word *home*?
2. What terms describe your home best?
3. Tell me about your home. What is it like?
4. What would you change in your home?
5. What would you call your home?
6. Which places in your house do you like best? Why?
7. In which places do you spend most time? Why?

It needs to be stressed that it is essential in narrative interview for the first question asked to be of general nature and not make the narrator feel like they have to excuse themselves for the experiences and sensations they talk about, but just the opposite – to inspire and encourage them to give longer answers. At the subsequent stages of the interview, detailed questions can appear and thanks to them the researcher will be able to examine more broadly the context of the events and situations told, as seen from the point of view of the narrator, and thus to attempt to understand their experiences. Therefore, narrative interview should begin with *How...?* questions, and end with *Why...?* questions.

ON LIMITATIONS IN NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

Difficulties which may appear in the course of conducted studies may be classified into the external ones – connected with the environment – and the internal ones, inherent to the studied subjects and the researcher himself/herself (Parczewska 2012, pp. 110–113). External obstacles include:

² Pupils' participation in the study was voluntary and preceded by parents' written consent.

- the principal of the institution (nursery or primary school) showing no interest in the subject matter of the research,
- unwillingness of the studied pupils' teachers to cooperate with the person conducting the study,
- lack of parents' consent to conduct the study with their children's participation,
- uncomfortable conditions in the institution which hinder interviewing children in an atmosphere of security, calm and confidentiality, or make it altogether impossible.

Limitations inherent to the respondents consist mainly in their disposition. Some children may exhibit shyness, unwillingness or distrust towards the interviewer, and thus their statements may be very short. Another difficulty is a low level of narrative competence. As research shows (Parczewska 2012, p. 110), younger children are not always able to relate the cause to the effect in their narratives. Another obstacle which might discourage researchers from conducting narrative interviews with young children is low communicativeness and expressiveness of their statements³.

Taking into account the limitations inherent to the researcher, one needs mainly to pay attention to the difficulty with achieving a state of *epoche*, or, as Husserl wrote (after: Moustakas 1994, p. 87), "the pure state of being required for fresh perceiving and experiencing". The *epoche* process requires the researcher to *set aside, exclude* all sensations connected to the previous knowledge; to open up to new things, which is not easy. The essence and meaning of *epoche* is described in an interesting way by Moustakas (1994, p. 85): "The world is placed out of action, while remaining bracketed. However, the world in the bracket has been cleared of ordinary thought and is present before us as a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a 'purified' consciousness". Therefore, *epoche* prepares the researcher to derive new knowledge, making him or her free from views, prejudices and stereotypes. Practicing *epoche*, every researcher should consider his or her thoughts concerning people, situations and ques-

³ Przetacznik-Gierowska lists three elements of communicativeness: 1. Explicativeness – it is assessed how detailed a child's story about a given event is, whether it takes into account all elements crucial for a full presentation of its course and whether there are commentaries completing the main thread; 2. Structural completeness – it is assessed whether the text constitutes a certain narrative whole (exposition, rising action and resolution). The spoken text is compared to the model of the macrostructure of a given narrative form. Macrostructure is a certain model of creating narrative texts, containing invariant elements of such texts; it is a programme of generating such narrations common to all of them, filled with different contents by the child; 3. The text's dependence on vs. independence from the context – it is assessed whether the child, telling the story, takes care for it to be understandable for the listener (text independent from the context). Expressiveness reflects the occurrence in the story of descriptions of the narrator's attitude to the characters and events appearing in the text. The expressive function can be realised through a direct presentation of the narrator's emotional state, through the manner of relating events and quoting the opinions of others. In the opinion of the author (Przetacznik-Gierowska 1987, pp. 7–31), this ability is correlated with the age of the speaker.

tions which are the subject matter of his or her enquiry multiple times, each time setting aside his or her prejudice and premature judgments, until he or she feels internally ready to learn about the situation, question or person the way they are. In general, *epoche* in its perfect form is rarely attained, but a regular and intense practice of the *epoche* process increases the competence to “[achieve] a presuppositionless state and [to be] open to receive whatever appears in consciousness, as such” (Moustakas 1994, p. 90).

Another threat inherent to the researcher consists in the fact that under the influence of previous experiences they can construct in their mind a certain model of the actor's behaviour, and being in a new situation, they will look for these elements which make it similar to situations known from the past: “they may look in their past experiences for such formulas which, according to their present conviction, led them to these practical results they are now trying to produce” (Garfinkel 1984, p. 201). This type of behaviour is a manipulation and may cause a result planned in advance. For the correctness of the conducted study, the researcher's knowledge about the examined problem is also important (“what they know, the manner in which they know it”); it constitutes an integral element of their social competence and they need to possess it (Garfinkel 1984, p. 206). What is extremely valuable during an interview is a direct contact of the researcher with the studied subject, referred to by Berger and Luckmann (1983, p. 62) as face-to-face contact.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature on the subject includes works devoted to numerous methods and approaches which fit into the category of qualitative research, such as: participatory research, case studies, participatory observation, visual methods, and interviews, including in-depth narrative interviews. All sorts of human experiences can be expressed through narration, which is present at any age, in any place and society – we can find it anywhere. In this type of research, the researcher attaches great importance to the analysis of the perspective of the studied subject and the meanings he or she gives to objects or experiences. Interviews give narrators a chance to talk about their experiences, and they let the researcher acquire a deep knowledge about them and understand them. In phenomenology, experience and giving meaning are the key conceptual constructs. The awareness of the existence of the narrative manner of learning about children opens up new pedagogical perspectives in small child pedagogy.

The few years I have spent dealing with narrations have shown me that the ability to collect data, analyse and interpret it is mainly acquired through practice, which constitutes the best way of employing one's knowledge and transforming it into relevant competences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alheit P. (2002), *Wywiad narracyjny*. Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja 2.
- Berger P., Luckmann T. (1983), *Społeczne tworzenie rzeczywistości*. Warszawa: PIW.
- Bokus B. (1984), *Nawiązywanie interakcji społecznych przez małe dziecko*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Bokus B. (1991), *Tworzenie opowiadań przez dzieci. O linii i polu narracji*. Kielce: Energiea.
- Bokus B. (2000), *Światy fabuły w narracji dziecięcej*. Warszawa: Energiea.
- Burzyńska A. (2008), *Idee narracyjności w humanistyce*. In: B. Janusz, K. Gdowska, B. de Barbaro (red.), *Narracja. Teoria i praktyka*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ.
- Chase S.E. (2009), *Wywiad narracyjny. Wielość perspektyw, podejść, głosów*. In: N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (red.), *Metody badań jakościowych*, t. 2. Warszawa: PWN.
- Dryll E., Cierpka A. (2011), *Zagadnienia teoretyczne nurtujące polską psychologię narracyjną. Wprowadzenie*. In: E. Dryll, A. Cierpka (red.), *Psychologia narracyjna. Tożsamość, dialogowość, pogranicza*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Psychologii i Kultury.
- Filar D. (2013), *Narracyjne aspekty językowego obrazu świata*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Garfinkel H. (1984), *Racjonalne cechy działalności naukowej i potocznej*. In: *Kryzys i schizma. Antyscjentystyczne tendencje w socjologii współczesnej*. Warszawa: PIW.
- Kopp I., Lippitz W. (2001), *Moje nieczyste sumienie jest właściwie superwrażliwe. Badania nad dzieciństwem w Niemczech*. In: D. Urbaniak-Zajac, J. Piekarski (red.), *Jakościowe orientacje w badaniach pedagogicznych*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo UŁ.
- Kos E. (2013), *Wywiad narracyjny jako metoda badań empirycznych*. In: D. Urbaniak-Zajac, E. Kos (red.), *Badania jakościowe w pedagogice: wywiad narracyjny i obiektywna hermeneutyka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Krawczyk-Bocian A. (2008), *Mity o narracji. Od subiektywizmu do problemu interpretacji*. Teraźniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja 2.
- Kvale S. (2011), *Prowadzenie wywiadów*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Ligęza M. (2004), *Specyfika narracji dziecięcych*. In: E. Dryll, A. Cierpka (red.), *Narracja. Koncepcje i badania psychologiczne*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologicznego PAN.
- Łebkowska A. (2004), *Pojęcie focus w narratologii – problemy i inspiracje*. In: J. Bartmiński, S. Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, R. Nycz (red.), *Punkt widzenia w tekście i w dyskursie*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Moustakas C. (1994), *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California–London–Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Parczewska T. (2012), *Doświadczenie koleżeństwa i przyjaźni przez dzieci z chorobami przewlekłymi*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS.
- Przetacznik-Gierowska M. (1987), *Rozwojowe i środowiskowe wyznaczniki mowy narracyjnej dzieci*. Zeszyty Naukowe UJ. Prace Psychologiczne 3.
- Rytl J. (2008), *Monolog, dialog, polifonia – pragmatyka narracji dziecięcej*. In: B. Janusz, K. Gdowska, B. de Barbaro (red.), *Narracja. Teoria i praktyka*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ.
- Shugar G.W. (2001), *U progu narracji: Rola operacji odniesienia*. In: I. Kurcz, J. Bobryk (red.), *Psychologiczne studia nad językiem i dyskursem*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii PAN.
- Słownik języka polskiego* (1984), Warszawa: PWN.

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie zalet procesu zbierania, opisywania i interpretowania danych jakościowych za pomocą wywiadu narracyjnego w perspektywie fenomenologicznej, a dotyczących świata życia dziecka. Idea narracji jako sposobu rozumienia tego świata otwiera szereg możliwości wspierania rozwoju osobistego dzieci.

Słowa kluczowe: badania jakościowe; fenomenologia; wywiad narracyjny; dziecko