Biographic-narrative interview is a powerful method. Lenka Formánková talks to Tom Wengraf[1]

I met Tom Wengraf in October 2011 when I participated, thank to financial support from my alma mater, Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University, at his seminar on biographic-narrative interpretative method – BNIM. I was familiar with his methodological approach before, as I read some of the numerous publications, which he published together with his wife Prue Chamberlayne. Their books were a great source of inspiration for me, when I was looking for the ways how to apply qualitative research strategy in an international comparative research, dominated by quantitative approaches.

The interview was conducted at the kitchen table in the London house of Tom and Prue, in the same casual environment, where the five days course took place. Tom was very open to talk, the interview lasted for more than two and half hours. Prue also joined us at the end of the interview. I have adopted their biographic-narrative method in the interview, so I obtained very rich narrative, which was hard to reduce for the purpose of journal interview. Therefore I have focused mainly on parts, when Tom talks about his methodological approach to biographic research and related topics.

When I looked for the main theme in Tom´s narrative (and life), I repeatedly came across his resistance to conditions and rules of the academic world, if he was not congruent with them. This rebellion goes through his whole life story and it is also reason for Tom's academic engagement. At the same time this revolt is a source of motivation for his ever continuing exploration of sociology and other disciplines in searching for research tools and theories which would convene with his views regardless of the scientific mainstreams.

Lenka Formánková: Tom, this issue of Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum journal focuses on the life course approaches in the social research. Therefore I would like you to talk about the particular qualitative method you developed called Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). Please tell me how you came across the method and how you developed it. You can tell me anything you find important.

Tom Wengraf: Well, I was originally trained as a historian. I didn't get my history degree, I wrote an attack on Oxford History instead. Then I did sociology at the London School of Economics and I enjoyed that. Then I started a PhD thesis on the agrarian reform in Algeria, which I never completed either. And then I got a job as a sociologist. And my entire career has been teaching sociology. And doing research. Towards the end of my university career I focused on methodology particularly specializing in the use of interviews.

In 1995 I went to a British Sociological Association conference in Essex. Prue Chamberlayne, who had been trained by Gabriele Rosenthal (who designed the biographic-narrative method) in Germany was giving a paper about caring and carers. Her research used the biographic method. I was really excited about the richness and the depth of the material she was using and the way she was talking about it. Two years later Prue and I developed a partnership, (and we are now married!) And I joined a European project called SOSTRIS. Across seven European countries we were investigating social strategies in risk societies using the biographic narrative method now known as BNIM It was an international team with people from Italy, Germany, Greece, Sweden, France, Spain and the UK. It took us two years and I learned an enormous amount from it. As a result of our comparative approach, we got to know how very different welfare arrangements and informal cultural responses impacted on the experience that people had, which was really very interesting.

Even before I met Prue I'd been writing a text on qualitative interviewing. I had written probably three quarters of it before I met her. After I have learned how to use this particular method which we called BNIM, I then put two chapters about BNIM into my book on Qualitative Research Interviewing. And then I taught the method at my university in Middlesex and even after I retired from Middlesex I went on teaching BNIM to all sorts of people in all sorts of contexts and writing more material about it.

I've been training people for about twelve years in this method and I've been writing a long textbook, just on BNIM It is now more than 900 pages. And that's been sort of my main professional focus before, certainly before I retired, certainly after I've retired as I've said before.

Lenka Formánková: As you said, during your doctoral studies at the London School of Economics you wrote a thesis on the agrarian reform in Algeria. Can you tell me how it all happened?

Tom Wengraf: This was in 1964 when I went to Algeria. Algeria received its independence in 1962. I was on a board

of a Marxist sort of progressive journal called New Left Review. The Algerian government called a conference for non-governmental aid to Algeria. I was very interested in Algeria and I agreed with a friend of mine that the only aid we could give would be to write an article about the history of the colony and the decolonisation. Nobody knew about Algeria in Great Britain as it was a French colony, not an English one, "so who cared what was happening over there". I was in Algeria for a year and I left shortly after a military coup took over. It led to a military dictatorship that has continued ever since. In the moment of the coup, all my key contacts in Algeria were either arrested or went underground or fled to France. So I went back to England and I started to write my first paper on agrarian reform in Algeria.

My paper included some data, which was about the impact of the Algerian liberation struggle, which lasted from 1954 to 1962, on the agricultural statistics. The National Office for Agrarian Reform in Algeria gave me a very nice little brochure printed on glossy paper. It showed that actually there have been a fall of agricultural production and everything during the war, but in 1963, one year after the end of the war, it was back to where it had been in 1954. So they gave it to me and I said WOW, that's amazing! One tenth of the population killed, how did you do it? Or how is it done? I can't quite remember how the conversation went, but I do remember what they said was actually," Don't tell anybody, but we haven't a clue what the production of Algeria is like. Our entire infrastructure is destroyed, how could we know anything at all?" They just took the 1954 figures, modified them slightly and put them down as 1963, because it looked better than to admit they have no idea. So in my paper I talked a little bit about the difficulty of relying on statistics when studying liberation struggles and even the period after the liberation struggles. And I was basically told by my every eminent sociology supervisors in London "well if you haven't got the statistics, then you shouldn't be saying anything at all about the liberation struggle and agrarian reform." Well, they didn't quite say it like this, but it was like "that's journalism, not research". And I did not want to use only the statistics count. It was to be multi-method. I invented my own method. I did a lot of interviewing of people in self-managed farms and self--managed businesses and I was of course dealing with a large farms and the industry being integrated by the French, so I had a lot of interview material. But all that was just hearsay for statistical sociologists, it didn't count as sociological facts.

Lenka Formánková: Would you tell me a bit more about this skepticism towards statistics and the paper you wrote about it?

Tom Wengraf: I'm very interested in statistics, because it seems to me that a good statistics can show a lot about the society. If you look at the income statistics of let's say the US or the UK, inequality has been growing like crazy in those two countries. And statistics are so much more interesting than let's say just anecdotes about the rich or anecdotes about the poor. For me, political economy and statistics, if you can trust the statistics, are absolutely crucial for understanding a society. If you can't trust the statistics – and all governments are very careful about their official statistics – that's different.

On the other hand, I don't believe in attitude surveys very much. It is all dependent on what questions you ask and it doesn't get into depth about people's grasp on their local reality. If you're part of an elite which is in power and you want to get something through and you want to ensure popular support, you just have a six-month propaganda campaign and the statistics will show more and more people agreeing with you and they'll vote for it in the 'target month' and then six months later they'll all be furious they all voted for something that turns out to be bad. So some statistics I think are very important and others I'm not very interested in. I have a very good friend who is a part of a group called Radical Statistics in Britain and what they do is develop critiques of official statistics as statisticians would do. There is a whole movement of radical statisticians who try to show the basis of what's good and the significance of what's been left out.

Lenka Formánková: Do I understand correctly that you find the qualitative interviews better tools to understand people's opinions and attitudes?

Tom Wengraf: When you just ask somebody to tick boxes, they will tick boxes for any reason, it doesn't have to have anything to do with them selves. You're not inside the mind of the person at all. In a long interview, particularly if you don't interrupt too much, they are much more likely to show their mind's workings. Most people, if they're not telling the truth, it shows up in their voice, it shows up in stumbling or it shows up in all sorts of ways. You can start to take a grip on the reality behind the interview through the person telling the story about the reality or disguising the reality through their story. Let people talk and follow up what they want to follow up, I think that's quite a powerful way of understanding situations. I think that fully structured interviews where you repeat standard questions are basically a waste of time. Because you can't ask further questions corresponding to certain sensitive hypotheses about what's not being said. There is a theory that people are always defending themselves against anxiety. According to Erving Goffman in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", people are presenting themselves so as not to look bad or to seem like something is amiss. Not necessarily all of them. Anyway, if you are concerned about self-presentation either consciously or unconsciously you are defending yourself or your organization or what-

ever. Therefore, to understand reality, you have to be able to read the defenses; you need to be able to know what is not being said. So if you believe that all persons of interest, all governments, all societies, all individuals, all groups, all social groups always necessarily operate with unconscious defensiveness and usually with some conscious defensiveness and manipulation on top of that, then a methodology that doesn't enable you to explore that merely recycles as true what people want you to believe is true. It only adds the stamp of "and so science says" on top of the plausible defenses. So you have to have mixed methodologies that enable you to get behind, or to come to interesting insights into both what people reveal and what people conceal. And a methodology that doesn't do that is a methodology that carries little or no interest but a lot of ideological plausibility.

Lenka Formánková: You said that you were not very keen on statistics and you did not like the way sociology was approaching reality. So what was the path you took to become an expert in methodology?

Tom Wengraf: I started teaching at Middlesex in 1966. But I wasn't teaching methods, I was teaching theory. At that time, I thought theory was the most important thing in the world. At that time, we became very hostile to something called empiricism. The empiricists thought facts were important and just inferred theory from the facts so you didn't even need to bother to infer theory, there were only facts and facts spoke for themselves, they said. That was our major philosophical enemy early on in my teaching career at Middlesex, and actually much more generally as well. And so I taught theory and I didn't want to do research. Somehow the Algerian experience and not being able to do anything with it, I thought I can't be bothered, that I had enough. So I taught sociological theory that was my key function I did at Middlesex.

During the time I was teaching the theory there were so many theoretical revolutions, in which a new theorist would come in, denounce all the others as "antiquated, dangerous, absolutely awful and here's my new theory". Every half a year or half-decade there would be a new, dominant theorist, who would then later fade completely from momory. Obviously they were self-publicising intellectuals with a way of inventing long words for old ideas. I stated to get the sense I'd seen this before and I remember reading a book by Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian sociologist who fled from the U.S.S.R round about the time of the Russian Revolution. He went to America and wrote some dusty books, which nobody except me had ever read of my generation, called "New Modern Sociological Theory". And it was absolutely funny because he took the modern sociological theories and he said "this is just a repeat of this Greek philosopher of the 3rd century B.C". Not that the person had taken it from there, but there was nothing new there. Sorokin was just very good at debunking it. I agreed with his perception that under a constant supply of new bottles every 6 months actually some very old wine is being constantly recycled.

So I said to myself "empiricism is bad and theoreticism is just as bad, fetishism of facts is bad and fetishism of concepts is just as bad". However theorist can only see the problems of empiricism, they can't see it in theoreticism because they're in it and they make their careers on the basis of it. So I had lots of struggles with various English theoreticists (my friends and myself) on the basis of this. I found myself going back to a philosopher of science called Gaston Bachelard. His most interesting book was called "Formation of the Scientific Mind" (the name was in French). In the book he explains that "facts without theory are blind, concepts without facts are empty", something like that. Bachelard was also a chemist, he was an actual natural scientist. The other thing he said was "truth advances by the rectification of error" and there's no other way to truth except by making mistakes, getting them rectified. So if you want to learn a science you have to follow that path. There's no good trying to learn the current absolute truth by the most recent theorist. You have to retrace historically the movements of the science in order to see yourself and the current science as something historical, about to be rendered obsolete. Bachelard was great. He was like Thomas Kuhn but I think better.

Lenka Formánková: Do you remember a particular moment when you especially felt that an interview is a very powerful method, as you said at the beginning of the interview?

Tom Wengraf: I gradually found my way towards interviews and this was also because I had been involved in psychotherapy, psychodynamics, encounter groups and all sorts of humanist psychotherapy themes that flourished in the 1970s. In my personal life I was very interested in depth psychologies and humanistic psychologies. I didn't think they were terribly good but useful to some extent. I suppose I discovered in my personal life that I was very intellectually defended. I dealt with reality by multiplying theories and staying in a theoretical realm, talking to other people, theorizing and actually not noticing three quarters of what was true about myself. And at the same time, the women's movement had started, about 1970 or so, and they were all into consciousness-raising groups. Actually I was involved in setting up the men's consciousness-raising groups. I also married somebody who turned out to be a lesbian feminist a while after our marriage. That first marriage disintegrated, but for a time we formed a mixed group. It was quite funny because we went to a heterosexual couple group the first and third week of the month and in separate men's groups and women's groups on the even weeks of the month. And that was quite powerful except at one stage the

women declared they didn't want to meet with men ever again, and so the couples group collapsed. It sort of rather coincided with my marriage collapsing at the same time. But anyway, there's a whole arising… "the personal is the political". So, on the one hand, there was humanist psychology which was saying, the facts --even if you can't talk about them -- about interpersonal experiencing, are important and real, and then there was the women's movement talking, raising assumptions about everyday practices. So I got much more into the everyday empirical (lived experience) reality. That forced a new concern with facts, particularly a new concern with interviews as opposed to introspection, reading a book or having a theory as a way to understand a reality. That led me back to methodology. Methodology was the third point in which you could talk about theory because of theory: given your theory what methods do you use?, or given the facts that you're interested in what methods do you use to generate a theory?… for me methodology was the active place where you didn't fetishize either a given theory or a given set of facts, but could think critically about the relationship between the two.

So I became a methodologist. And my interest is very much about appropriate concepts and methods for grasping both the inner worlds of people which are normally like the preserve of psychology or depth-psychology and the societal realities of people which are dealt with by historians, geographers, sociologists or others. So I am trying to develop concepts and methods which keep the two in a complex relationship rather than having or being narrow inner--world specialists in psychology and outer world specialists in let's say sociology who are never talking to each other, or being able to understand each other or having nothing but total (private) contempt for each other.

Also, it is important to focus on the cross-societal and cross-temporal perspective. People who only study one society at one time always think they're discovering universals', when actually they're accounts about a particular historical situation, that society, that time, that class. It would be very valuable, but they turn it into general universal theory and so they produce massive trouble and ignorance. So I'm pushing for a thing, an approach, called the 'psycho--societal' and I'm definitely a minority voice, in which you aren't doing psycho-societal research unless you're studying more than one society and unless you are covering a rather longer period of backwards and forwards history than just one generation in the present.

Lenka Formánková: You said that you are the minority voice in the group of British scientists interested in the psycho-social research. Can you tell me more about it?

Tom Wengraf: I could expand this but it's difficult. So I'm talking about a little intellectual movement in Britain called "a movement for psycho-social studies" which tries to span the inner world and the outer world and to explore the connections between the two. The members of the group are social workers and all sorts of psychologists of some sort or other, usually social psychologists. That's good, because social psychology covers the small group behavior and how the group influences the individual and how the individual influences the group, a very good start, and in fact it is THE START.

So that's very good. But the danger is that the psycho--social is just social psychology turned around with a strong psychoanalytic input. And I have nothing against a strong psychoanalytic input. I think you can get the insight from other places but fine, if people get these insights from psychoanalysis, why not, it's a very economical way of getting them and there's also lots of stuff which is good about it. On the other hand, what *they aren't getting* is what you might call the macrosocietal and the long-term historical. The sociologists' perspective is needed in terms of how I was trained as a sociologist, when our key focus was macrosocial.

Psycho-social when it just deals with social is reduced to the people who know each other or might know each other: the family, the neighborhood, people in the same firm, people in the same church, and so on. I would call it the immediately social, because everybody lives in a life where it's all immediately social. The studies about it are of great importance. However, they're not societal sociologists, let alone comparative societal, let alone people who understand world market economies and long-runs in comparative history and so on. Most sociology theories are not part of the psychosocial research as it currently predominantly operates. My minority position is unpopular in two aspects as I insist on the macrosocietal and the cross-comparative. As the predominant group is depth-psychology preoccupied in the immediately-social , interest in the immediately psychosocial, then they resist the macrosocietal because they never learnt the concepts and certainly not the methods for studying those very important dimensions.. It's a whole new universe requiring another three years or undergraduate study or six years to PhD level. Where would they have the time to do that? So there's a resistance against that. And of course, the macrosocietal sociologists who only speak one language don't know much about the macro-societiies of any other linguistic region.

Moreover the sociologists of the contemporary and social psychologists, analysts of the contemporary, all of them are not very interested in the past.

And that corresponds to a fear of the past and a whole cultural thing about all politicians saying: "we are now in a new epoch, it's the post-industrial, post-this, post--that, let's all forget about what was before the post, we're now post-it-all". So there's a very strong cultural hostility against the past, partly because it gives a critical grip on the present. And ideologists don't want researchers to have a critical grip on anything. And therefore my concern for *the history* of the contemporary.

Most sociologists don't want to add to their own task by actually going far into the past, or for that matter far into the future. Now, economists, geographers, natural resource scientists do a lot of work on the long path and the far future. People are thinking very hard at a planetary level, how did we come to have such a large population, how did certain areas like the Mediterranean get totally stripped of trees, what do we do and what's going to happen in a hundred years' time, the military are totally obsessed with balances of power and long-term planning and building something that will only start coming to production in thirty years' time. But sociologists are very interested but only in what happens next year or maybe after five years hence: they are afraid of researching what is likely to happen in the lifetime of their grandchildren, and don't care about researching the world of their grandparents.

Therefore my approach is going to be a minority thing. Individuals on their own have the time for one PhD, not three; one undergraduate degree, not three. So clearly, people are not going to welcome that, because there's no way under normal conditions of a rather short lives, rather low amounts of money and rather pressing demands for research products in a given discipline. So, frankly the sorts of knowledge that I think you need to understand the individual BNIM case requires a multidisciplinary team.

An inner-world specialist, an outer-world specialist and a historian --because most inner-, outer-world specialists aren't historically-minded -- actually could do some well--informed psycho-societal research of the sort that I think is good. However it requires the specialists trained to understand how to work together with the other types of specialists. At the moment, sociologists are taught that psychological facts are uninteresting and only contemptible people like psychologists would be interested in that sort of stuff. And on the other hand psychologists know that sociologists are total crap when it comes to describing the inner lives of individual people. So why should they bother to read any sociology? And historians know that psychologists just like sociologists are all theoretical and don't know anything about the facts; the real facts of history. Actually the trainings have to involve training to cooperate and think with the people from the other two disciplines. Because if you leave it to the fetishism of the discipline, all they will learn is how to have contempt for other disciplines…. out of terrible fear because they know nothing about them.

Lenka Formánková: Let's get back to the evolution of your Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method. If I understand correctly, it all happened after you met your wife Prue Chamberlayne. Would you describe in greater detail how you met her at the conference in 1995…

Tom Wengraf: Something like that. I hate sandwiches at conferences. They're usually rather dry and brittle and wrapped in unpleasant plastic, um and so on and so forth. So, I went off to my session and I had with me a string bag. In my string bag I had lots of oranges, okay, because you get very thirsty. I remember there were underground rooms and they had air-conditioning. So I went to hear Prue (Chamberlayne) and Annette King and the two of them produced this book on cultures of care in East Germany, West Germany and Britain. She had just described the method a little and I thought, "Wow!" You know, really good. She fit it in with humanistic psychology very well. Anyway, I listened to it and I talked to her afterward a little and she was going off to like one session or I was going off to another session. Either immediately afterwards or perhaps one session more than afterwards, we actually found ourselves going to the same session; which since we both are interested in the same stuff, wasn't so surprising. And I offered her some oranges. So we never looked back. She was very happy to talk to me about her methodology and I was very, very keen to learn all about it. And I was quite attracted to her as well anyway.

Quite soon I joined the SOSTRIS project, a two year long European Union project. That was great; I did a lot of participant observation of the biographic method in action. Eventually, I decided that it shouldn't be just Prue and me in the Anglo-Saxon world, who knew about this method. I wanted to understand it, so whenever I understand anything I start writing about it. At some point, I started to teach the method, but it was not my original motivation. I just wanted to understand it. And there was this very systematic method of both doing the interviews and interpreting them.. We were seven national teams trained by Roswitha Breckner from Vienna University who was trained by Gabriele Rosenthal in Germany.

Lenka Formánková: Now would you explain a bit more the difference between the biographic method by Rosenthal and BNIM by you and Prue Chamberlayne?

Tom Wengraf: Ok, well, Gabriele Rosenthal's method is now, you can say, a tradition, but it's only been a tradition for twenty years or so. I think her PhD thesis which describes it at a quite high level of philosophical abstraction was published in 1995. It's a Gabrielle and Wolfram Fischer--Rosenthal product and BNIM is a particular variant. I know that Gabriele and Wolfram hate my formalization, in a sense that I represented Anglo-Saxon positivist technicism, as opposed to German philosophical profundity. So what I've done, is to reduce and produce a technical skeleton, which is quite easy to learn, particularly given the textbook and the BNIM guide as it now is. Lots of people have used it without ever meeting me and without even ever having read the *BNIM Short Guide and Detailed Manual*. I've written up the procedures in such a way that they are as untied as possible to any particular philosophical or theoretical school. That was my aim. Because I wanted the ideas to spread. I've tried to systematize more – and give more

concrete examples -- than they did at that time in 1997. What we offer in the training is a different way of comparing cases from the way they did.

One of the concepts taken over from Gabriele which we religiously followed is: what is the structure of the case? So there was a deep structure of the case and we had to find out what it was. And I can't tell you the amount of pain and anguish as we tried to find an unambiguous and 'fully final' structure of the case. And that was within, if you like, a positivist model of reality.

Well, since then, particularly with post-modernism and various philosophical changes and social sciences, people are no longer totally sure that in reality, that we can actually know a final knowledge. There may be a 'structure of the case', but there's no way that we can prove our version of it is the only possible one. So now we don't talk about the structure of the case, we talk about the model of the psychosocial reality. It's *just a model*, there could be another one, we can argue. So I think, that's quite different from the implicit philosophy of Gabriele and Wolfram (and ourselves) in the early 1990s. And the other thing – the guide and manual that I talked about and the method is more open about my current way of thinking which is psychoanalytically informed. I've also extended the discussion of systematic techniques all the way up to 'the evolution of the case' and then the comparison of cases.

Lenka Formánková: Thank you very much!

Poznámky:

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