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Unveiling the unspoken in life story interviews

The dynamics of storytelling in the Lutheran congregation in Belfast

Christian RITTER

Abstract: *Based on an ethnographic investigation into the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Belfast, this paper explores how members of this community experienced the life story interview. Despite an ongoing need for emotional support for victims of past conflicts, the use of the autobiographical research method in post-conflict societies has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature on sensitive ethnographic fieldwork. In this paper, I seek to understand the role of the life story interview during my fieldwork in Northern Ireland. The study of the faith-based community brought to light a social taboo in the Lutheran circle. The daunting past of the Belfast congregation was barely mentioned in the get-togethers following the church service. Moments of silence frequently occurred during the interview sessions when questions about the past congregational life were raised. Since the life story interview was based on an open-ended questioning style, the risk of upsetting traumatised interviewees could be mitigated by a sensitive conduct of the interview session, i.e. giving interviewees the opportunity to interrupt the recording at any time. Furthermore, the qualitative study unveiled that the autobiographical method initiated storytelling and biographical work, which are widely considered crucial first steps towards the healing of traumatised persons.*

Keywords: life story interview, research ethics, religious minority, ethnographic fieldwork, Northern Ireland.

Résumé : *Basé sur une enquête ethnographique dans la congrégation luthérienne germanophone à Belfast, cet article explore comment les membres de cette communauté ont connu l'entretien autobiographique. Malgré un besoin permanent de soutien émotionnel pour les victimes des conflits passés, l'utilisation de la méthode de recherche autobiographique dans les sociétés post-conflit n'a pas été suffisamment prise en compte dans la littérature sur le sensible travail de terrain ethnographique. Dans cet article, je cherche à comprendre le rôle de l'entretien autobiographique pendant mon travail sur le terrain en Irlande du Nord. L'étude de cette communauté religieuse a mis en lumière un tabou social dans le cercle luthérien. Le passé intimidant de la congrégation de Belfast a été à peine mentionné dans les réunions suivant le service de l'Eglise. Des moments de silence se produisaient fréquemment pendant les séances d'entretien lorsque des questions portaient sur la vie de la congrégation dans le passé. Comme l'entretien autobiographique était basé sur des questions ouvertes, le risque de bouleverser des interrogés traumatisés pouvait être atténué par une conduite sensible de la séance d'entretien, c'est-à-dire en donnant la possibilité aux interrogés d'interrompre l'enregistrement à n'importe quel moment. De plus, l'étude qualitative a dévoilé que la méthode autobiographique initiait la narration et le travail biographique, qui est largement considéré comme une première étape cruciale vers la guérison des personnes traumatisées.*

Mots-clés : entretien autobiographique, éthique de la recherche, minorité religieuse, travail ethnographique de terrain, Irlande du Nord.

Introduction

On 22 May 1998, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which resulted from long-standing negotiations between the political parties of Northern Ireland, was approved in referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This event heralded a new era of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. In this paper, I reflect on using the life story interview during ethnographic fieldwork in the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Belfast. Biographical research is conducted by various social science disciplines and numerous autobiographical interview techniques were developed to analyse personal trajectories (e.g. Atkinson, 2002; Bertaux, 2003 and Wengraf, 2001). The use of autobiographical interviews in anthropological research can be traced back to the late 19th century (Langness, 1965: 5). The research technique was variously refined in the course of the 20th century. Despite a myriad of textbooks on biographical research in the social sciences, the use of autobiographical methods during sensitive fieldwork in post-conflict societies has barely been addressed. Combining participant observation with life story interviews, I immersed myself in the Lutheran congregational life in Belfast and participated in services, the subsequent get-togethers, and various church outings. The majority of church attendees were born in Germany. Approximately 4,000 German-born residents lived in Northern Ireland in 2011 (CSO, 2014). The fieldwork in the post-conflict society involved various challenging moments and required extensive reflections on sensitive issues, which I wish to discuss in this paper. Based on empirical evidence from the Lutheran case in Northern Ireland, I critically examine how members of the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Belfast experienced the life story interview.

The Belfast congregation of the Lutheran church was established in the aftermath of World War II. Its founding coincided with various migration flows from Germany to the British Isles. Great Britain recruited German workers immediately after the Second World War (Steinert, 1996), while hundreds of German children threatened by the risk of starvation were brought to the Republic of Ireland as a result of humanitarian aid by a Dublin-based charity (Molohan, 1997). The establishment of the Belfast congregation was emphatically promoted by the Lutheran World Federation throughout the 1950s. By the mid-1950s, more than 60 members regularly attended the Sunday service (Prüßmann, 2009: 14). In the following decades, the Belfast congregation of the Lutheran church continued to be a tightly-knit community. During the Troubles, the congregation provided its members with a sense of security and was a place to foster networks of mutual support. In the early 1970s, one member of the congregation, Thomas Niedermeyer, who acted as a manager of the local Grundig branch at the time, was abducted and killed (Simpson, 2010). In 1984, the Belfast congregation established a partnership with the much larger congregation in Dublin, and the monthly services have therefore been held by a pastor from Dublin. Various of the long-standing members of the local congregation described themselves as belonging to the "Protestant side", mainly because they resided in Loyalist areas during the conflict.The purpose of this paper is to understand the role of the life story interview in research settings that require sensitive fieldwork. To conduct sensitive research, qualitative scholars reflect on potential vulnerabilities of the research participants during recruitment, data collection and analysis (Low, 2008: 779). The analysis of the Lutheran case reveals that the

storytelling encouraged by the open-ended, repetitive interview style of the life story interview initiated first curative processes within traumatised research participants. This paper is split into three main sections. First, I describe how trust was built with members of the Lutheran congregation. The second part discusses the preparations that were made prior to the fieldwork to maintain ethical integrity in the post-conflict region. Finally, I illustrate how storytelling unfolding during a life story interview can instigate healing processes in the specific context of Northern Ireland.

Gaining access to fieldsites

The life story interview was an integral part of the qualitative study of the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Belfast. According to the epistemological stance of social constructionism, qualitative inquiries are, to a certain extent, the product of social negotiations involving a triangular interplay between researcher, researched community and scientific community (Schwandt, 2003: 309). The ethics of life story interviewing become particularly apparent in the interaction between researcher and researched community. In order to identify the effects that my presence as a researcher had on the research process, I turn back on myself and reflect on how the relationship between the researched community and myself evolved in Belfast. The content and depth of the life narratives elicited by the life story interview depended on the trust building during my participations in congregational life. I needed to create trustworthy relationships within the congregation to gather reliable life narratives. Given the appalling extent of political violence experienced by many residents of Northern Ireland in the past, gaining access to research participants remains very challenging to this day and it can still be very dangerous to nose around in some interface areas. However, in contrast to my expectations, gaining access to fieldsites and winning trust of congregation members took place without major obstacles. Since I had arrived in Northern Ireland only weeks before attending my first Lutheran service in Belfast, the congregation members perceived me as a newcomer who could not have been involved in the past conflict. This status facilitated the creation of trust with congregation members in the social gatherings after the service. Such get-togethers were called "church coffee" and took place in the same church building. Having been invited to lunch by some congregation members, I also met them in more private contexts in their homes and neighbourhoods. These initial interactions in the first, say, three months of the fieldwork gave me the opportunity to build up trust with a number of congregation members whom I went on to interview in the later stages of the investigation. However, I sensed from time to time the weight of the past in some conversations during my first church visits. Some church attendees voiced their concerns over participating in the study and giving a life story interview, because they feared that the accounts of their suffering might be taken out of context. One interviewee admitted in confidence that he was afraid of further intimidation in his neighbourhood and that his home would be targeted, if he publicly criticized the wider Protestant community. He explicitly did not want his name to appear in a "research report in a university library or in a newspaper article addressing the Troubles.The acceptance of my research project by key stakeholders, namely the pastor couple and a local member of the Lutheran Church of Ireland Council, was a breakthrough for the data collection and made an extended

access to fieldsites possible. I vividly remember my first lengthy encounter with one of the pastors who approached me at the beginning of the get-together after the service. We went on to discuss the research project in detail whilst we were having coffee. The ecumenical engagement of the congregation and the practice of "open communion" that welcomes all baptised Christians to participate in the sacrament were repeatedly emphasised. Although a baptised Catholic but infrequent practitioner, I was welcome to participate in the religious rituals of the service. After the stakeholders had agreed on the purpose of the research project, my interview requests were more acceptable. In addition, sharing the same country of origin and language undeniably facilitated my access to the fieldsites of the Lutheran congregation. However, I was not familiar with the religious rituals of the local congregation, which created awkward situations at the beginning of the fieldwork. Joining the local congregation as a newcomer to Northern Ireland, I was not burdened with the past conflict and assigned a role of a "neutral" churchgoer despite my Catholic background. My middle class background also played a part during fieldwork. As the Lutheran congregation in Belfast is composed of members from various social backgrounds, I intentionally adapted my register to theirs. For instance, I gained the trust of an interviewee in a discussion after the service by avoiding overly sophisticated language and using slang. The creation of mutual trust is vital for conducting life story interviews, since the data quality largely depends on the relationship established between interviewee and interviewer prior to the interview session.

The conduct of the life story interview is usually split into two main sub-sessions. As lived experience is accumulated in personal narratives, this interview technique unveils the viewpoint of the narrator (Chamberlayne *et al*., 2000: 6). In other words, the stories are told from a "native point of view" (Geertz, 1974: 26). For that reason, autobiographical methods can give voice to minorities, the silenced and the disadvantaged. At the beginning of the first sub-session, I asked my interlocutors to tell me their life story[1]. At this first stage of the interview, the interviewee constructed an initial autobiographic narrative, and I remained fairly passive, so that the free-associative flow of the interviewee's memories was only slightly directed. The second sub-session, which was mainly held after a short break, reiterated the main stages of the initial life narrative. In this second part of the interview, I extracted more content from the topics mentioned in the initial narrative by raising story-eliciting questions on the basis of the notes taken in the first sub-session (Wengraf, 2001: 119). Often a keyword like "college" or "Berlin" was written down and used as a reminder for follow-up questions. My primary role as interviewer was to encourage lengthy life narratives by posing narrative-pointed questions. These questions followed the order in which topics emerged in the initial narrative. Follow-up questions were phrased in accordance with the wording of the interviewee.

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1 I used the same opening question in all interviews. The first sub-session of the life story interview was initiated by a single request:
I want you to tell me your life story, all the events and experience which were important for you, up to now. Start wherever you like. Please take the time you need. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for after you've finished telling me about your experiences. (Wengraf, 2001: 121)
This opening, namely the Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN), allows the interviewee to develop an initial autobiographic narrative.

The quest for ethical integrity in a difficult context

The discussion of the potential of life story interviewing to support healing processes in post-conflict contexts grew out of my fieldwork experiences in Northern Ireland. In order to set the social context of these experiences, I will briefly describe how Northern Irish society has evolved since the GFA in 1998. From the late 1960s to the mid-1990s, paramilitary-style violence, such as political or sectarian killings and bombings, flared up in Northern Ireland. These events are commonly known as the Troubles: a political conflict over the constitutional status of the country. In 1994, the IRA declared a complete ceasefire, which raised hope for sustainable peace and prosperity in the province. Northern Irish society, however, continues to be deeply divided along religious lines. The two conflicting communities are usually described as Ulster Unionists or Loyalists, who want Northern Ireland to remain part of the UK, and the Nationalists or Republicans, who aspire to a reunification of the northern and southern Irish states. Unionists are predominately Protestant and identify themselves as British. Most members of the Nationalist community come from a Catholic background and consider themselves to be Irish. In spite of a power-sharing strategy in local government which pacified the region to a degree, prevailing residential segregation remains a price to pay for the current "peace." The number of so-called peace walls increased from 22 to 48 between the early 1990s and late 2000s (BBC, 2012). Low-level violence persists in some interface areas, despite a more integrated higher education system and numerous cross-community projects attempting to bridge the divide. Fuelled by the tense atmosphere in various neighbourhoods, members of ethnic or religious minorities are often the new victims of hate crimes (e.g. Kempny, 2011).

Given the degree of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland, the ethics of conducting fieldwork in the region were intensively reflected prior to the investigation. As a result, I intended to develop a sensitive research style from the very start of the ethnographic investigation into Lutheran community life in Belfast, which was part of my doctoral research project. The research was based on confidentiality between researcher and research participants. As suggested in the UK Data Protection Act (1998), research-relevant information was treated as confidential throughout the entire research process. Furthermore, congregation members who were willing to give a life story interview were asked to provide informed consent. I gave interviewees a participant information sheet and a consent form prior to the recording of the interview. In doing so, I could ensure that interviewees were sufficiently informed about the scope and purpose of the investigation, their degree of involvement and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, advice from scholars who had already conducted fieldwork in Northern Ireland raised my sensitivity to the possible vulnerability of interviewees, including emotional distress or, in extremis, episodes of post-traumatic stress. Researchers conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the province are urged to develop a research style which encompasses openeness and transparency of the research process. Ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Ireland also requires a sensitivity to the use of specific political connotations that evolved during the Troubles (e.g. Knox, 2001). For example, some interlocutors used the combined expression "Sinn Féin-IRA," as opposed to merely Sinn Féin, when referencing the political party during the life story interview, evoking violent associations of the past. Since life narratives often include private

stories about family members and close friends, exposing intimate recollections, there are profound implications in relation to the ethics of fieldwork in a post-conflict society. In order to perform sensitive fieldwork, I discussed the ownership of the life narrative with the research participants and categorically reminded them that their stories could be completely anonymised if so desired. Despite all the preparations of the fieldwork and continued ethical considerations during the investigation, the experiences I made during fieldwork transcended my initial understanding of the life story interview.

How the life story interview can facilitate healing in post-conflict settings

The fieldwork in the Lutheran congregation in Belfast brought a social taboo to light: in that congregation members very rarely mentioned the troubled past of the congregation in the informal get-togethers following the services. In the context of this research into the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Belfast, the concept of social taboo is understood as a collective prohibition against specific types of behaviour and discourse, which is largely upheld by long-standing members of a given community (e.g. Knight, 2002: 815). The suffering of congregation members during the Troubles was, however, formally addressed in church services. The following extract from a sermon by the Dublin-based pastor Dr Joachim Diestelkamp is a telling example of the psychological scars the Troubles have left:

> *While I was reading the contributions to our small jubilee book… as a preparation for the service, I realised how necessary, how important this small Lutheran church was during the Troubles in Northern Ireland... It's great that this cruel time is over. Thank God that there is a careful peace now. It's great that Protestants and Catholics can now gradually live together in a normal way. I have learned from the reports how important the Lutheran church was between the 1970s and 1990s not only for German nationals. It really was an emergency and consolation community...* (LCI, 2009).

The Belfast congregation is comprised of numerous long-term members, who have lived in Northern Ireland for several decades. The extract above indicates their psychological state without referring to any details. They suffered traumatic experiences in Belfast and had to find a way to carry on with their lives. The concept of trauma can be defined as an emotional reaction of the human psyche to terrible events, such as accidents, physical attacks and verbal abuses, often resulting in shock and denial. The distressing long-term effects of such experiences include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks and post-traumatic stress. During the data analysis various fragments of stories associated with traumatic experiences were identified, most frequently revolving around street violence during the marching season, damaged cars, verbal abuse and attacks on homes, such as repeatedly smashed windows. The religious community offered support in those difficult times.

Ever since I had gained the trust of numerous congregation members, I could take on various roles during the congregational life, which takes place in the church building of the local Moravian congregation, who invited their fellow Protestants to hold services in their place of worship. My participation in the service mainly included

singing religious songs and praying with other church attendees. Furthermore, I helped lay the table prior to the church coffee and tidy up the common room afterwards. The church coffee gave congregation members a welcome opportunity to break into smaller groups and engage in informal chats. I had already talked to M. for several times over church coffee, when I asked her to give me an autobiographical interview. We agreed to conduct the interview in the church building. The place was chosen as it was considered "quiet and safe to talk" by the interviewee. The interview with M. was part of a series of 15 interviews conducted with German-born Lutherans in Belfast and Dublin. The illuminating interview with M. exemplifies the use of an autobiographical method in a post-conflict context. Considering the interview as a co-authored narrative (e.g. Williams, 1984: 181), I felt it was my ethical duty to give the interviewee an opportunity to interrupt the recording, so that they could decide which stories to include. Embracing a sensitive research style, I wanted to ensure that interviewees could "...live easily with the stories that they tell and not feel worse about any aspect of their lives or experience as a result of taking part in research" (Sinding and Aronson, 2003: 115; quoted from Montgomery, 2012: 144). At an early stage of the data analysis, it transpired that the difficult interview situations during the fieldwork in Northern Ireland regularly revolved around the violent past of the region. Although I never explicitly raised questions about the Troubles, the conflict was part of the lived experience of many interviewees and quickly became manifest in their life narratives. M. came to Northern Ireland in the mid-1960s to learn English in Belfast and was initially employed by a local college. She met her now husband during her first years there. They decided to marry, and she stayed in Northern Ireland. Throughout the forty-five years she had spent in the country, she kept in touch with the local Lutheran congregation. In the course of the interview, she often asked me to stop the recording, when stories about her Northern Irish relatives came up. The request to expend on her complex family was denied. The following excerpt indicates how difficult situations arose in the course of the autobiographical interview.

Interview Excerpt 1:

M.: *And then we [M. and her husband, C.R.] decided to rent another house in the east of the city. [Pause.]*
I.: *How come?*

M.: *Ehhhmm. You know in those days life was different. We had to search for the house for quite some time. There was no internet! [Laughter.] It took a while to find a good place... [Pause.]*

I.: *Is there anything else you want to tell me about that?*

M.: *I think that... Ehhhmm. Can we take a break now? [Interruption of recording.]*

As this extract shows, my central aim was to encourage the narrator to tell more about the accommodation search. I realised that the repetitive questioning style had triggered unpleasant memories in the interviewee while I was reading the interview transcript. Sadly, I learned from another church member that some of her relatives were, to use the local expression, "burned out" of their homes in the late 1970s. They had to flee their neighbourhood. Moments of silence are an interrelational feature of qualitative interviews which are conducted in specific cultural contexts (e.g. Donnan and

Simpson, 2007: 6; Montgomery, 2012: 145). In the context of the transitional society of Northern Ireland, victims of the conflict choose silence as a way of dealing with the past to proceed with their lives. Endorsing the peace process requires cooperation across former conflict lines at the workplace and in public. Silencing stories of the suffering in the past enables people in Northern Ireland to create shared spaces, in which former opponents can reinforce the peace process. This social taboo makes, to a certain degree, cross-community projects possible. A further passage from the same interview contains a detailed narrative of a traumatic incident.

Interview Excerpt 2:

> *I remember that it was a warm summer afternoon and I was in the city centre to buy groceries. I had just visited a friend and was on my way to the bus. All of a sudden, I heard all that noise. I couldn't believe it! People were screaming and bricks smashed on the ground. I knew that a riot was breaking out and stones were thrown in all directions. I ran into a small local shop. There were other people as well. I was lucky that I managed to enter the shop. The shopkeeper was about to close the door. I was trapped in this shop for an hour. I was so scared. We didn't know what would happen and heard the bricks bouncing on the ground. It was so scary, you know. Life wasn't easy in those days...*

Shortly after this story was told, the interviewee asked for a further interruption of the recording. Verbalising the traumatic experience of a riot was a difficult but uplifting step. The stream of memories included terrible incidents and moments of severe anxiety. The life story interview technique unveiled some previously unspoken memories of M.'s suffering during the Troubles, which had remained a social taboo in many situations of her everyday life. Despite her discomfort during the interview, she appreciated the opportunity to "speak it out", as she put it when I met her at a later church service. Speaking from a present perspective, interviewees can reflect on past experiences and reinterprete sensitive issues. The social dynamics of the life story interview can initiate a continued storytelling of terrible memories and healing processes. In other words, interviewees become able to talk about their burdensome experiences and integrate them in their selves. The life story interview was variously praised for its curative potential and its positive effects on the interviewee's identity development (e.g. Rosenthal, 2003).

Conclusion

The suffering experienced by some members of the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Belfast during the Troubles remained a social taboo in various situations of the congregational life. Overall, the research participants described the life story interview as a challenging but relieving experience. Various research participants reported an improvement of their psychological well-being after the interview session. Based on the analysis of the case of the Lutheran congregation in Belfast, I suggest that the autobiographical method can initiate storytelling and biographic work, which are crucial first steps towards the healing of traumatised persons. Recognizing the suffering of interviewees and actively listening to stories they cannot openly tell in their everyday lives are two possible ways of instigating the social dynamics of a healing

process. The setting of the life story interview, often involving a repetitive questioning style, creates a space in which interviewees can narrate their stories in detail. In contrast to quantitative research techniques and semi-structured interview guides, the story-eliciting questioning style can accommodate the needs of vulnerable research participants. Providing interviewees with the opportunity to interrupt the recording of the interview at any time or to withdraw their participation in the study minimises the risks of upsetting research participants who previously suffered from traumatic events. For these reasons, I make a case for using the life story interview as a facilitator of healing processes in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The life story interview stimulates storytelling, which makes a rethinking of a person's life story and an integration of almost forgotten episodes into their selves possible. The previously unspoken becomes a matter of reflection. Recalling daunting experiences can be considered a first step to healing. Redeveloping an ability to talk about difficult experiences enables research participants to accept past omissions and to regain confidence in dealing with their past.

The study of the Lutheran congregation in Belfast confirms that the autobiographical method carries great potential for helping interviewees come to terms with unresolved issues from the past. The life story interview can generate "...a useful reflective space for interviewees, allowing them to express, communicate and work through painful or confusing past experiences" (Svašek and Domecka, 2012: 107). If interviewees engage in biographical work, they can help themselves to 'move on' with their lives. This healing effect is less likely to occur, when structured or semi-structured interviews are conducted. In the course of many interview sessions, I had the impression that I was actually one of the first people to hear lengthy accounts of the suffering endured by interviewees. Despite initial awkwardness, many interviewees appreciated the opportunity to rethink their lived experience and acknowledged the psychological value of the interview sessions. During the fieldwork in the Lutheran congregation in Belfast, the role of the life story interview as a driving force of biographical work became evident. The act of storytelling during the interview initiated a healing process within traumatised persons. Burdensome experiences are usually excluded from a person's biographical self-perception. After an initial physical shock, the sensory experience of traumatising events remains in the victim as embodied memories. The life story interview makes these unpleasant memories explicit, which helps interviewees reintegrate their traumatic experiences and give them a new sense. As a result of the reorganisation of their life stories, interviewees can view their experiences as an object and gain a new self-understanding. Despite its undoubtable potential, one of the major limitations of the use of the life story interview is that only a small number of research participants may benefit from the positive effects of the time-consuming research technique. In order to provide substantial support for victims, ethnographic researchers need to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration with psychologists and establish sustainable supervision networks. The curative effects triggered by the ethnographic interviewer can, however, develop their own social dynamics. Interviewees who have learned to speak about their terrible experiences can promote a dialogue within their community and family by breaking the collective silence. Continued storytelling of her unpleasant past can refresh the collective memory of Northern Ireland and create a shared space for an oral history that includes the voices of all communities residing in the region.

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