

THE EPISODIC INTERVIEW

Small scale narratives as approach to relevant experiences

by

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1. Developmental context
2. Underlying concepts
3. Episodic interviewing: how to get things going
4. Strength and weaknesses compared to alternative methods
5. Only answers? - good and bad use of Episodic Interviews
6. Literature

1. Developmental context

Qualitative research has been developed and is applied starting from various theoretical backgrounds. One common feature of different research traditions and methodological wings of qualitative research is (amongst other common features - see Flick 1998a for an overview of qualitative research and common features) that almost every method can be traced back to two roots: To a specific theoretical root but also to a specific issue it was developed for. The method presented in this chapter was developed in the context of a study on the social representation of technological change in everyday life (Flick 1996). This issue can be characterised by several features, which influenced the elaboration of the method: A social representation (Moscovici 1988; Flick 1998b for an overview) is a form of social knowledge, which means that it is shared by those who are members of a specific social group and that it is different from the knowledge shared in other social groups. Technological change has an impact on more or less every part of everyday life - of almost everyone, although the degree and time may vary in which new technologies are accepted and used. Change occurs in concrete situational contexts on the one hand - somebody buys a personal computer and this has an impact on the way how he or she writes from now on. On the other hand, such little changes sum up over time to a more or less general change in some parts of everyday life - today's childhood is completely different from childhood in earlier days due to various technologies and their most different impacts. Balances of such summing effects become aware more generally and independent of certain situations and enter knowledge in such a more general shape.

To study this issue, a method had to be developed which is sensitive for concrete situational contexts, in which little changes occur, and for overarching sedimentations of such changes. Finally this method should facilitate comparisons among cases coming from different social groups.

2. Underlying Concepts

Narrative Psychology

The episodic interview is based on several theoretical assumptions which can be traced back into different domains of psychology. One of its backgrounds is the discussion about using people's narratives for collecting social science data (see

Polkinghorne 1988; Riesmann 1993; Riemann & Schütze 1987; Flick 1998a, chap. 9). A narrative is characterised in this context as follows:

"First the initial situation is outlined ('how everything started') and then the events relevant to the narrative are selected from the whole host of experiences and presented as a coherent progression of events ('how things developed') until presenting the situation at the end of the development ('what became')" (Hermanns 1995, p. 183).

This discussion can be seen as embedded in a wider discussion in the social sciences about the narrative structure of knowledge and experience (Bruner 1987; Ricoeur 1984; Sarbin 1986). One of its sources can be identified in James (1893), who held "that all human thinking is essential of two kinds - reasoning on the one hand and narrative, descriptive contemplative on the other". This distinction has been taken up in discussions about a narrative psychology or narrative thinking in Sarbin (1986). Here, narratives are seen as "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful. Narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organises human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes" (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 1). In this context, it is taken into account that experience and life do not have a narrative structure per se. Rather, they are constructed in form of a narrative: "On reflecting on the incident, trying actively to understand it, you are constructing an account the structure of which is essentially narrative" (Robinson & Hawpe 1986, p. 118). Therefore, narrative thinking is seen as consisting "of creating a fit between a situation and the story schema. Establishing a fit, that is, making a story out of experience" (p. 111). and as the "projection of story form onto some experience or event" (p.113). This reconstruction of experiences as narratives involves two kinds of processes of negotiation. Internal/cognitive negotiation between experience and the story schema includes the use of prototypical narratives given in a culture. External negotiation with (potential) listeners means that they are convinced by the story of the event or reject or doubt it in its major parts. The result of such processes are contextualised and socially shared forms of knowledge.

Episodic and semantic knowledge

A second background is the distinction of episodic and semantic memory (going back to Tulving 1972), which has been taken up to distinguish episodic and semantic knowledge for example in expert systems (see Strube 1989).

According to this discussion, episodic knowledge comprises knowledge which is linked to concrete circumstances (time, space, persons, events, situations), whereas semantic knowledge is more abstract, generalised and decontextualised from specific situations and events. Both parts are complementary parts of "world knowledge":

"Episodic knowledge is part of the world knowledge, whose other part - corresponding to semantic memory - is the general (i.e. not concrete, situatively anchored) knowledge, e.g. conceptual knowledge, rule knowledge, knowledge of schemas of events" (Strube 1989, p. 13).

In order to make accessible both parts of knowledge for studying a concrete issue like technological change, an interview should meet specific criteria:

- it should combine invitations to recount concrete events (which are relevant to the issue under study) with more general questions aiming at more general answers (like definitions, argumentation, and so on) of topical relevance;
- it should mention concrete situations in which interviewees assumedly have made certain experiences;
- it should be open enough to allow the interviewee to select the episodes or situations he or she wants to recount and also to decide which form of presentation he or she wants to provide (e.g. a narrative or a description). Point of reference should be the subjective relevance of the situation for the interviewee.

Figure 1 summarises these relations on the level of knowledge and presentation again:

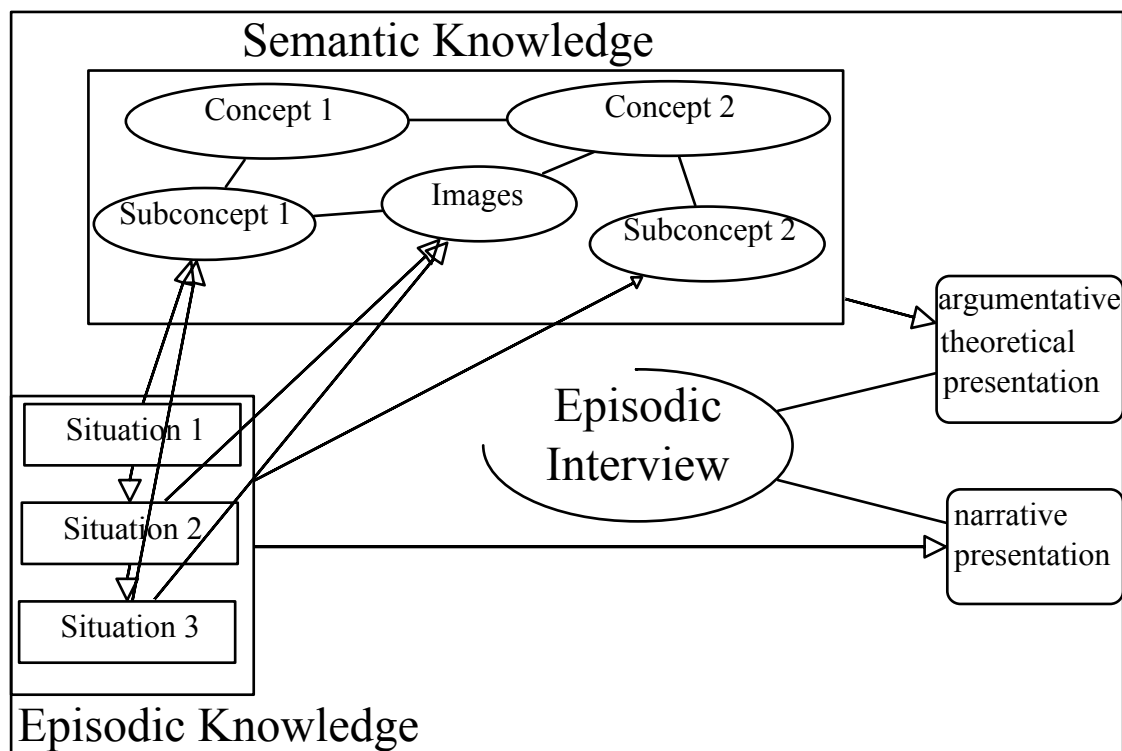


Figure 1: Forms of knowledge and presentation in the episodic interview

3. Episodic Interviewing: How to Get Things Going

The episodic interview was created to put this conception into concrete terms. It may be outline in nine phases. Each of them is a step towards the end of analysing interviewee's everyday knowledge about a specific issue or domain in a way which allows to compare knowledge of interviewees from different social groups and thus as a social representation.

Phase 0: Preparation of the interview

The episodic interview is based on an interview guide in order to orient the interviewer to the topical domains, for which narratives and answers are required. The interview guide may be developed from different sources: From the researcher's experience with the area under study, from theoretical accounts of this area, from other studies and their results, and from preparatory analyses of the area for relevant domains. In this step, it is important to develop a preliminary understanding of the area under study, which is suitable to cover it in its relevant parts and at the same time to formulate questions and the whole

guide open enough that new aspects may emerge and can be introduced by the interviewee.

In the technology study, the guide covered the following major areas of everyday life and technology (for more details, see below): The general first part of the interview focuses the interviewee's "technology biography" and the "mechanisation of his/her everyday life". In the central part of the interview, special technologies are focused - in this study, computers and television. Then, more general topics related to technological change are mentioned again: Questions refer to consequences of technological change, to responsibility (for change and consequences), to trust, and to fears concerning technologies.

It has proved to be useful to examine the guide and the questions in one or two test interviews. If several interviewers work on the same study, or if the interview is used in the context of research seminars with students, an interview training is most useful, in which the principle of the interview and crucial questions as well as the principle of situation narratives are checked and trained.

Phase 1: Introducing the interview principle

The first part of the actual interview is the instruction of the interviewee. To make the interview work, it is important to explain the principle of the later questions to the interviewee and familiarise him or her with this principle. The interview may be introduced by a phrase like:

"In this interview, I will ask you repeatedly to recount situations in which you have had certain experiences with ... (e.g. technology in general or with specific technologies)".

As experiences with using this interview have shown, it is extremely important to take care of this introduction and to check whether the interviewee has understood and accepted its message.

Phase 2: The interviewee's concept of the issue and his/her biography in relation to the issue¹

¹ To illustrate the procedure a little more beyond the context in which it was developed, some questions taken from a study on the social representation of health in different social groups are used as examples as well.

To enter the topic, the interviewee first is asked for his/her subjective definition of the study's issue in a question like:

"What does technology mean for you? What do you associate with the word 'technology'?" or:
"What is this for you, 'health'? What is related to the word 'health' for you?"

Then, the interviewee's way into the field under study is reconstructed. For this purpose, the first encounter with the issue under study the interviewee can remember is mentioned:

"When you look back, what was your first experience with technology? Could you please tell me about this situation?" or:

"When you look back and remember, when did you first think about health? Could you please tell me about that situation?"

In questions like these, the main principle of the episodic interview is applied: To ask the interviewee to remember a specific situation and to recount it. Which situation he or she remembers or selects for responding to this invitation, is not fixed by the interviewer. This decision may be used in the later analysis to compare the interviewees' degrees of proximity to the issue under study for example. The way through interviewee's personal history with the issue of the study is then continued by asking for specially important or meaningful experiences with this issue:

"What was your most relevant experience or contact with technology? Could you please tell me about that situation?" or

"What was your most significant experience of health? Could you please tell me about that situation?"

Here again, it is the interviewee's subjective relevance, which determines about which technology and of which situation he or she tells. Whether an interviewee refers to health maintenance or to an episode of more or less severe illness again is his or her decision. These priorities later go into the comparative analysis of the different cases. Especially in interviews, in which still a rather indirect access to the issue (e.g. health) is chosen by the interviewee, a re-focusing may be indicated. Then the interviewer should continue by asking:

"There are times, when we feel more healthy than in other times. Could you please tell me about a situation, in which you felt particularly healthy?" or:

"When does health become an issue for you? Could you please tell me about a situation of that kind?"

Phase 3: The meaning of the issue for the interviewee's everyday life

The next part of the interview aims at clearing the role of its issue in the interviewee's everyday life. In order to enter this realm, the interviewee first is asked to recount a day with reference to the issue:

"Could you please recount how your day yesterday went off and where and when technology played a part in it?" or:

"Could you please recount how your day yesterday went off and when health played a role in it?"

This kind of questions aims at collecting narratives of a chain of relevant situations. Then those areas of everyday life which are regarded as relevant for analysing the phenomenon under study are mentioned in greater detail. There the interviewer can choose one of different strategies. In the technology study, we asked people whether they had the impression that technology now has become more important in their lives:

"If you look at your life, do you have the impression, that technologies today play a bigger role in it than they did before? Could you please recount a situation for me, in which technology takes more room than it did before?"

Then they were asked various questions about domains in their everyday life, which are or which they wish to be free of technology, or where they wished to have more or better technologies and for situations to exemplify this for the interviewer.

In this study, domains like household, work and leisure were mentioned in the sequence. For each of these domains a question like the following one was asked:

"If you look at your household, what role does technology play in it and what has changed here. Could you please tell me about a situation which is typical for that?"

In the health study, the domains to explore were "everyday life and household" and "work and leisure":

"If you think of food, which role does health play in this context for you? Please tell me about a situation typical for that!" or

"Who in your household or family takes care of health? Please tell me about a situation typical for that!"

These questions shall help the interviewee to reflect on the meaning and relevance of the issue under study in general for his or her everyday life in different aspects.

Phase 4: Focusing the central parts of the issue under study

The next part of the interview concentrates on the central part of the issue according to the actual research question of the study. In the technology example, the study focused not only technology in general, but especially computer and television as key technologies of everyday changes. Here again, first the interviewee's subjective definition of each technology was mentioned:

"What do you link today to the word 'computer'? Which devices do you count among computers?"

The first encounter with each technology is the next step to mention for each technology:

"If you look back, what was your first encounter with a computer? Could you please recount that situation for me?"

These questions are followed by several other questions focusing the use of computers in different domains of everyday life. The same proceeding follows for television:

"What do you link to the word 'television' today?"

"If you look back, what was your first encounter with television? Could you please recount that situation for me?"

"What part does television play in your life today? Could you please recount a situation for me, which makes this clear for me?"

"On what does it depend, if and when you watch TV? Could you please recount a situation for me, which makes this clear for me?"

In the health study, the central focus was on the interviewee's dealing with prevention and intervention in questions as:

"Do you avoid situations which are risky for your health. Please recount a situation, in which you avoided a danger to your health!"

"What do you do, if you don't feel well? Please recount a typical situation for that!"

"What do you expect from your doctor with regard to your health? Please recount a typical situation for that!"

This phase of the interview aims at elaborating the interviewee's personal relation to its central issue. The questions just given as examples have the function to open the doors to the interviewee's personal experiences. A main task of the interviewer is to respond with deepening enquiries to the interviewee's answers and narratives in order to make the interview as substantial and deep as possible.

Phase 5: More general topics referring to the issue under study

Finally, some more general topics are mentioned in the interview in order to enlarge the scope again. Accordingly, the interviewee is asked for more abstractive relations:

"In your opinion, who should be responsible for change due to technology, who is able to take the responsibility or should take it?" or

"In your opinion, who should be responsible for your health, who is able to or should take the responsibility or should take it?"

A further aspect is the interviewee's fantasies concerning expected or feared changes:

"Which developments do you expect in the area of computers in the near future? Please imagine and tell me a situation, which would make this evolution clear for me!".

This part of the interview aims at elaborating the interviewee's cross-situational framework-knowledge he or she developed over time. As far as possible, the interviewer should try to link these general answers to the interviewee's more concrete and personal accounts in earlier phases of the interview in order to make discrepancies and contradictions. Applications of this interview have demonstrated, that in many cases discrepancies and contradictions emerged between the more general argumentation in this phase and personal experiences and practices that were reported before.

Phase 6: Evaluation and small talk

The final part of the interview is devoted to its evaluation by the interviewee ("What was missing in the interview to mention your point of view?"; "Was there anything bothering for you during the interview?"). Like in other interviews, it seems fruitful to add a period of small talk, which allows the interviewee to talk about relevant topics outside the explicit interview framework ("what I forgot to mention..."; "What I actually wanted to say..." "My wife had a funny experience, I don't know, if this fits in your study, but...").

Phase 7: Documentation

In order to be able to contextualise the narratives and answers received from the interviewee, a context protocol should be written immediately after the interview. To use a prepared sheet as orientation for this purpose has proved to be helpful. Depending on the research question it should include information about the interviewee (his or her family situation, profession, age etc.) and about the interview (when, how long, who was the interviewer etc.). Most important are the interviewer's impressions of the situation and the context of the interview and of the interviewee in particular. Everything astonishing and all that was said after the tape recording stopped should be noted.

Contextual Information about the Interview and the Interviewee

Date of the interview:

.....

Place of the interview:

.....

Duration of the interview:

.....

Interviewer:

.....

Indicator for identifying the interviewee:

.....

The interviewee's gender:

.....

Age of the interviewee:

.....

The interviewee's profession:

.....

Working in this profession since:

.....

Professional field

.....

Raised (countryside/city)

.....

Number of children:

.....

Age of the children:

.....

Gender of the children:

.....

Peculiarities of the interview:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Figure 2: Example of a documentation sheet

The interview should be tape recorded and transcribed in full length and detail. The degree of detailing and exactness needed depends on the kind of research question (see Flick 1998a, chap. 14 for this).

Phase 8: Analysing Episodic Interviews

For analysing episodic interviews, coding procedures as suggested by Strauss (1987) or Strauss & Corbin (1990) or Flick (1998a - thematic coding) have been applied.

Timing of episodic interviews

Episodic interviewing itself (phase 1 to 7) takes around 60 to 90 minutes. This time varies according to number of questions prepared, depending on the interviewee's readiness to recount and the skill of the interviewer to direct the interviewee towards detailing and comprehensiveness in his or her narratives.

4. Strength and Weaknesses compared to Alternative Methods

The method briefly presented here may be compared with other methods created with similar intentions.

Critical incident technique

The "critical incident technique" of Flanagan (1954) may be regarded as some kind of 'historical ancestor' of the episodic interview with regards to some common intentions. This method is mainly applied for analysing professional activities and demands. With the concept of the "critical incident", it is based on a basically similar concept as episodes and situations in the episodic interview. Differences can already be seen in the following characterisation:

"The critical incident technique outlines procedures for collecting observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria. By an incident is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer

and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects" (Flanagan 1954, p. 327).

This outline already shows that this method rather dealing with clearly defined situations with regards to intentions and effects, which are analysed in order to draw conclusions and assessments about the acting person. It is more the event and less its situational context, which is in the focus. Compared to this, the episodic interview rather leaves it to the interviewee which type of situation to mention in order to clarify a certain type of experience. Therefore, the episodic interview is more oriented to obtain narratives of different types of situations rather than situations which have been defined according to criteria fixed in advance. A special attention is paid to the subjective meanings expressed in what is recounted, in order to find out the subjective and social relevance of the issue under study. The critical incident technique on the other hand is more interested in the facts in what is reported:

"it is clear that the critical incident technique is essentially a procedure for gathering certain important facts concerning behaviour in defined situations. (...) The extent to which a reported observation can be accepted as a fact depends primarily on the objectivity of this observation. (...) It is believed that a fair degree of success has been achieved in developing procedures that will be of assistance in gathering facts in a rather objective fashion with only a minimum of inferences and interpretations of a more subjective nature" (Flanagan 1954, p. 335).

Where the episodic interview aims at *contextualising* experiences and events from the interviewee's point of view, the critical incident technique rather stresses a *decontextualisation* of the factual proceeding in the reported events. Accordingly, huge amounts of incidents are collected with this method (up to 2000 events in one study), which are classified and reduced afterwards. In the centre is

"the classification of the critical incidents. (...) Once a classification system has been developed for any given type of critical incidents, a fairly satisfactory degree of objectivity can be achieved in placing the incidents in the defined categories" (Flanagan 1954, p. 335).

More recently Wilpert & Scharpf (1990) used this method to analyse problems in the contact between German and Chinese managers:

"The interviews relied mainly on the Critical Incident Technique (...) whereby managers were asked to report particularly problematic incidents as detailed as possible" (Wilpert & Scharpf 1990, p. 645).

Here again, the factual events in the reports are more focused than in the episodic interview. Furthermore, the method of Flanagan in general is more restricted to a specific fragment of experience - particularly problematic events - which is justified in the research questions it is applied to. The episodic interview is designed more open in this respect, because it wants to focus not only problematic situations, but also positive, surprising, satisfying etc. situations, because an issue like technological change may not be reduced to its problematic aspects. It is rather the aim to give space to the interviewees' subjectivities and interpretive feats in the principle of situational narratives and not to reduce and classify them at once but to discover the context of meaning in what is recounted.

The Focused Interview

The focused interview may be seen as some prototype of semi-structured interviews. Some of its principals and criteria for its successful application (see Merton & Kendall 1946) become relevant for the episodic interview as well:

The criterion of *nondirection* was a guide line for the decision not to confront interviewees for reasons of a higher comparability and standardisation with given situations, but to ask him or her to select and recount those situations that seem for him or her particularly relevant for a certain domain.

The criterion of *specificity* is put into concrete terms, when the interviewee is asked to recount situations and as far as possible situations in which he or she has had specific experiences him/herself. It is his or her decision whether and how far he or she takes up the invitation to give a detailed narrative and whether this criterion can be met in the interview. Merton & Kendall (1946, p. 545) define their criterion as follows: "Subjects' definition of the situation should find full and specific expression".

The same is the case for the criterion of *range*: In episodic interviews there is not a specific area of experience defined, for which one narrative is stimulated (as in the narrative interview of Schütze for example (see below)). Rather, the interviewee is asked for narratives of relevant situations coming from a variety

of everyday domains. This comes closer to the criterion of Merton & Kendall, who postulate:

"The interview should maximise the range of evocative stimuli and responses reported by the subject" (p. 545).

Finally, the episodic interview also tries to meet the fourth criterion of Merton & Kendall by focusing situations:

"Depth and personal context: The interview should bring out the affective and value-laden implications of the subjects' responses, to determine, whether the experience had central or peripheral significance" (p. 545).

Again, the embedding of information to collect in their context across narrative stimuli shows a way to meet this criterion.

The Narrative Interview

The narrative interview was developed by German sociologist Fritz Schütze (1977; see Riemann & Schütze 1987; Bauer 1996 and this volume; Flick 1998a, chap. 9). Here, the following principle is applied:

"In the narrative interview, the informant is asked to present the history of an area of interest, in which the interviewee participated, in an extempore narrative. (...) The interviewer's task is to make the informant tell the story of the area of interest under question as a consistent story of all relevant events from its beginning to its end" (Hermanns 1995, p. 183).

After one "generative narrative question" (Riemann & Schütze 1987, p. 353) the interviewee is expected to recount in a long, extensive, ex-tempore narrative his or her history with the issue under study - mostly his or her (professional or illness) biography. The interviewer's task is to refrain from any directive intervention once the narrative has started, until a clear signal (a coda) is given, that the interviewee has arrived at the end of his story. Only then, the interviewer should try to lead the interviewee back to aspects he or she has not yet narrated in full detail and to try to make him take up these parts again and recount the missing parts. Only in the very last part of the interview, the interviewer is allowed to ask non-narrative questions. The quality of the data is

mainly assessed by answering the question whether they are narrative data and to what extent. Basic assumptions in the background of the method are, that the interviewee - once he or she has accepted the setting and has begun to narrate - he or she will not only be driven to finish the story but also will be driven to tell true facts:

"In the narrative-retrospective edition of experiences, events in the life history (whether actions or natural phenomena) are reported on principle in the way they were experienced by the narrator as actor" (Schütze 1976, p. 197).

This strength is attributed to narratives different from other forms of interviews. Narratives obtained with the narrative interview are extremely long (up to 16 hours in some examples) and rather difficult to orient towards specific experiences and issues. This produces problems in the interpretation of data and in comparing data coming from different cases. Its strength is, that it produces rather complex and comprehensive versions of subjective views of interviewees. The episodic interview is more oriented to small scale situation based narratives and therefore easier to focus in the data collection. It refrains from claims for 'true' data and rather focuses constructive and interpretive achievements by the interviewees. It does not give priority to one sort of data like the narrative interview does with narrative data, but wants to use the advantages of different forms of data - episodic and semantic knowledge and narrative and argumentative expressions.

Comparison of the episodic interview with alternative interview forms

Table 1 summarises this comparison of the different interview forms again:

interview <i>critterion</i>	The episodic interview	The critical incident technique	The focused interview	The narrative interview
Indication for using the interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • everyday knowledge about certain objects or processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • comparative studies of problematic situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluation of specific stimuli (films, texts, media) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • biographical processes
Openness to the interviewee's viewpoint by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the selection of the situations to recount • giving room for narratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • asking for detailed accounts of incidents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the criterion of specificity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giving room for a comprehensive narrative
Structuration of the data collection by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the interview guide • types of questions (for definitions and for narratives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the focus of critical incidents • the orientation on facts in the events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giving a stimulus • structured questions • Focusing feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generative narrative question in the beginning
Technical problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to make the interviewee accept the concept of the interview • explication of the principle • handling the interview guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduction of the data to categorisation of (many) incidents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dilemma of combining the criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to maintain a narrative once begun by the interview • problems in directing the narrative to the issue • big masses of hardly structured data
limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the limitation on everyday knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restricted to problematic situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the assumption to know objective features of the object is to question 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more case sensitive than ready for comparisons

Table 1: The episodic interview compared to alternative interview forms

5. Only Answers? - Good and Bad Use of Episodic Interviews

The use of the episodic interview unfolds its advantages compared to other methods especially when the interviewer receives many rich and detailed narratives of situations. A rather bad application means that only answers naming topics without recounting any narratives result from the interview.

Stepwise ruling and criteria for assessing the application of the episodic interview

In order to ameliorate the application of the episodic interview and to enrich the narrative quality of the obtained data, the following table indicates rules for every of the phases discussed above and criteria to assess whether the major tasks of each of phase were fulfilled:

Phases	Rules	Criteria
0: Preparation of the interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare an interview guide based on a pre-analysis of the field under study • Run test interviews and an interview training • Prepare a documentation sheet for the context of the interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the interview guide cover the area under study? • Did the interviewer(s) internalise the principle of the interview? • Does the documentation sheet cover the information relevant for the research question?
1: Introducing the interview principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a good introduction for the interviewee and pay attention to its clarification to the interviewee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the interviewee understand and accept the principle of the interview?
2: The interviewee's concept of the issue and his/her biography in relation to the issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare questions for subjective definitions of relevant concepts • Prepare questions covering relevant steps in the interviewee's personal history with the issue or the field under study • Pay attention to any point, where a deepening enquiry is needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do questions touch relevant aspects of the subjective meanings for the interviewee? • Are the questions oriented towards narratives of (relevant) situations? • Did the interviewer enforce the narrative principle of the interview and ask additional questions to bring more depth into the interview?
3: The meaning of the issue for the interviewee's everyday life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to cover relevant areas of the interviewee's everyday life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are questions heading for situation narratives? • Are they open enough for the unexpected?

4: Focusing the central parts of the issue under study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to get into as much details about these topics • Try to increase the depth and richness of the interviewee's responses by additional enquiries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the interviewee gone into details and depth? • Has the interviewer been sensitive for any extra depth to focus?
5: More general topics referring to the issue under study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to avoid too general reasoning without any personal or situational reference in the interviewee's responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the interviewer managed to lead interviewee's responses back to the level of personal concerns?
6: Evaluation and small talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give room for some conversation • Give room for critique and additional aspects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Were additional aspects mentioned?
7: Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply the documentation sheet • Good tape recording • Detailed transcription 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are all additional information (not on the tape) documented?
8: Analysing episodic interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chose an appropriate method for coding and interpreting the narratives and answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the method take the quality of the data into account (e. g. the narrative structure of accounts)?

Table 2: Stepwise ruling and criteria for episodic interviews

There are different types situations, which may characterise the response of the interviewee. Some examples illustrating different types of situations are taken from the technology study mentioned above.

Types of situations in the episodic interview

The first and main type is the *episode* i.e. a certain event or situation the interviewee remembers, like the following example, in which the interviewee recounts how he learnt biking:

"Well, I can remember, the day, when I learnt biking, my parents put me on the bicycle, one of these small children's bikes, sent me off, it was not that long, that I went by myself, my father gave me some push and let me off, and then I continue to ride until the parking lot ended and then I fell on my nose (...) I believe this is the first event I can remember".

A second type are *repisodes*, i. e. representations of repeated episodes (in the sense of Neisser 1981), some situation which occurs repeatedly. One

interviewee was asked for a situation making clear on what it depends when he watches TV and recounted:

"Really the only time, when television has a certain relevance for me is New Years day, because I am so struck, that I can do nothing else but watching TV, well I am doing this since years, to spend New Years day in front of the TV..."

A third type are *historical situations*, referring to some specific event. One interviewee referred to Chernobyl when he was asked for his most relevant experience with technology:

"Probably, well the reactor catastrophe at Chernobyl, because that has intrigued rather decisively the live of many people, that made it clear for me the first time, how much one is at the mercy of technologies..."

Datasortes in the episodic interview

Applications have shown that in the episodic interview not only these types of situations are presented, but also different sorts of data:

- *situation narratives* on different levels of concreteness;
- *repsodes* as regularly occurring situations, no longer based on a clear local and temporal reference;
- *examples*, which are abstracted from concrete situations, and metaphors also ranging to clichés and stereotypes;
- the subjective *definitions* (of technology or health) explicitly asked for and
- linked to them: *argumentative-theoretical statements*, e.g. explanations of concepts and their relations.

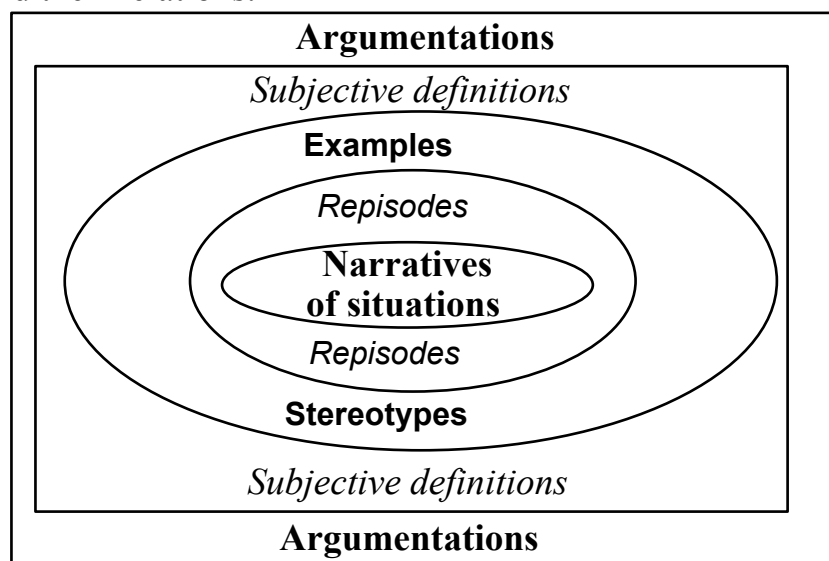


Figure 3: data sorts in the episodic interview

Quality indicators in episodic interviews

The quality of interviews can not simply be judged by applying criteria like reliability and validity in their traditional understanding (see for this and what follows in more detail Flick 1998a, chap. 17 and 18). But, some approaches to come closer to the aims linked to these criteria. The *reliability* of episodic interviews can be increased by the interview training mentioned above and a detailed analysis of the test-interviews or the first interview. A second step towards more reliability of the data obtained with the episodic interview is a detailed and careful documentation of the interview and the context of what has been said and recounted. The third step is a careful transcription of the whole interview. *Validity* of the data may be increased by introducing a step of *communicative validation*, in which the interviewee is presented the data and/or interpretations resulting from his or her interview in order to give him or her the chance to consent, reject or correct them. His or her consensus then is a criterion for the validity of the data. Finally, the episodic interview is in itself an attempt to put into concrete terms the idea of within-method *triangulation* (Denzin 1989, see also Flick 1992) by combining different approaches (of narrative and argumentative type) to the issue under study in order to raise the quality of data, interpretations and results.

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Martin Bauer

London, October 1996

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