

7 Uncovering the general from within the particular

From contingencies to typologies in the understanding of cases¹

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Introduction

This chapter addresses two questions concerned with interpreting biographical interviews in the social sciences. The first question has to do with the limits of 'staying with the interview text' and I argue that we need to be more explicit about how we always – except for limited technical purposes – go beyond the text in order to interpret it. The second has to do with the way that analysing the interview text of one case can already generate considerable – but normally neglected – resources for understanding other cases, for typologising, and for elaborating general models.

Much of the motivation behind oral history and feminist research in Britain and elsewhere for interview work with ordinary people has been to give such people their own voice, after having been kept 'hidden from history' or allowed into social research only if 'spoken for' by others. Simplifying, one might say that *the function of the researcher is held to be to give voice and the printed page to those who require mediation to get their voices into the public arena*. At most, the words spoken might be minimally edited, to eliminate repetition and to facilitate reading. Replacing the words of the speaker by the interpretation of a researcher was, though, counter to the ethos of the operation. The work of Studs Terkel (1975) might be considered as a classic example, and indeed he refers to himself as 'compiling' the book in question. However, in the chapters of this book, as in other social science research publications using biographic materials, there is a considerable amount of interpretation involved in the reporting of most of the work. Together with contemporary oral historians (Perks and Thomson 1998), I argue that, in order to understand the voice of the Other as fully as possible, we must explicitly go beyond simple recycling of the verbatim text, and even beyond sophisticated formal text-analysis. The social science researcher's professional comparative

knowledge and universal concepts make such a 'going beyond the text' by way of the social science researcher's imagination (Mills 1959) inevitable; questions of context and of subjectivity necessarily arise and should be fully addressed and researched. I discuss this in the first part of the chapter and put forward a 'diamond' model to contextualise the practice of text analysis.

Having taught qualitative interviewing for a number of years, I have found that students have a considerable difficulty in moving from the study of the single case to that of comparing and contrasting multiple cases, developing typologies and generalising. More recently, I have been involved in the SOSTRIS (1998a, 1998b, 1999b) cross-cultural comparative research across seven European societies, using narrative interviews analysed according to the biographic interpretive method (BIM) associated with Gabriele Rosenthal and Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1998: 2–7 and references; Breckner 1998). This has made me realise how a grounded-theorising method of work on a particular case, as practised within BIM, provides considerable – if frequently unused – resources of generality and typification with which to work on other cases, resources that I argue ought to be inspected *before* one starts to search 'in the literature' for pre-existing concepts and typologies into which the 'case' might be squashed. I highlight these resources and the desirability of using them in the second part of the chapter.

In the third part of the chapter, I discuss the way that real and imagined different historical contingencies are a good ground for formulating types and typologies between the 'particular' and the 'general'. Finally, I suggest an eight-fold typology of typologies used and usable in biographical analysis.

Understanding the told story

Biographic narrative interviews are constructed around enabling the interviewee to provide an uninterrupted narrative of their own life (Wengraf 1998). They are asked to 'tell their story in their own way, beginning wherever they like, for as long as they like'. This initial narrative – which can last ten minutes or three hours – is their told story. Treated as text, it is the pivotal focus of analysis, supplemented by material developed by further questioning which starts only when the initial narration is brought to an end by the interviewee.

If the task is to understand this initial narration, the told story, how is 'understanding' to be achieved? I find an idea of Scheff (1997) helpful in this respect. He argues that understanding is accomplished through the

process of social and societal *contextualisation*: by relating, in Spinoza's words, 'the smallest parts to the largest wholes':

No matter how exhaustive the analysis of a text, the determination of meaning will be incomplete and therefore partially subjective without referring to relevant historical and biographical knowledge... Verbatim excerpts from discourse, one might argue, are *microcosms*, they contain within them, brief as they may be, intimations of the participants' origins in and relations to the institutions of the host society.

(Scheff 1997: 30, 48)

Scheff argues for the widest possible version of 'context': he provides us (1997: 54) with a 'part/whole' ladder for the analysis of interview material. The 'macro' end of the ladder is startling, but, for some arguments that one might wish to make, he convincingly argues that it may have to be brought into explicit consideration:

- Single words and gestures.
- Sentences.
- Exchanges.
- Conversations.
- Relationship of the two parties.
- Life histories of the two parties.
- All relationships of their type.
- The structure of the host society: all relationships.
- The history and future of the host civilisation.
- The history and destiny of the human species.

He continues:

Practical intelligence in the lifeworld appears to involve abduction, that is, the rapid, effortless shuttling up and down this ladder... All levels are implied in the actual understanding and practice of discourse. The process is awkward to describe in explicit language, but it takes place constantly, effortlessly, and instantaneously in discourse.

(Scheff 1997: 54–5, 58)

This seems very useful. It is worth noting that 'all relationships of their type' in Scheff's ladder would include all other cases that might be relevant to be compared with, and so help us to understand, the focal-case of any

particular piece of biographical research. It is also worth noting that his 'part/whole' ladder includes cross-cultural and cross-time comparison as essential components in the understanding even of one particular single-incident, single-time, case.

Extending Scheff, it should be noted that we bring with us to the work of analysis – and can also construct – *alternative* 'part/whole ladders' of conceptual framework and theorisation. Just to illustrate, Freud might provide one theory (paradigm), Marx or Weber another, for the illumination of the same interview text. Relating Scheff's argument to that of Kuhn (1962), different disciplines or collections of disciplines can be defined in part by their different conceptualisation of part/whole ladders and their different procedures for relevant data-collection and data-interpretation.² We cannot evade our specific inheritances and our training, and they are valuable cultural capital when properly used, but we can avoid giving them a false ontological inevitability which blocks any critical self-review. As interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research teams know (Cooper, this volume) but as Scheff does not sufficiently emphasise, there is more than one (conceptualised and proceduralised) ladder to choose from!

The historical dimension

The *historical dimension* should also be stressed. It is a component of Scheff's ladder but perhaps an understated one. There is still a tendency for sociology and some other social sciences to deal in relatively unhistorical pictures of the present, leaving the discipline of history to research and describe the past. In order to understand the present perspective and situation of an individual interviewee, we need to know as much as possible about his or her personal and interpersonal history, and to locate that personal and interpersonal history within the history of contexts. Such a knowledge of the real history of the person and contexts enables us to understand – rather than just recycle – personal stories:

Given the precariousness of communication, presenting and creating oneself as a 'person' seems to be possible only by telling *how* one became what and who one is now. I can only understand myself and communicate myself in a narration if I conceive myself as someone who is constantly changing and yet still me, i.e. as an integrated person, including my biographical transformations and contradictions. The individual as a dynamic system of plural sub-selves is realised in his or her *life stories*.

(Fischer-Rosenthal, this volume)

This emphasises the told story, but Fischer-Rosenthal elsewhere stresses the need to explore *relevant documentation* for life stories being interpreted: a good example would be the attempt to document the war record of ex-Nazis suspected of attempting in their told stories to obfuscate that record (Rosenthal 1998: 249–63). Without knowledge of the evolving history of Nazi and post-Nazi Germany, the significance of any stories told cannot be properly understood. Such a researched knowledge of history and context, not least of evolving history of context, is necessary to understand anybody's story, including our own (see e.g. Friedlander 1998).

Scheff's insistence upon the importance of *context* and of *history*, deliberately taken very broadly, is a major reason why understanding biographic materials cannot stop at the recycling of the text.³ A second question that he does not foreground but is of extreme importance is that of the *researcher's theory of the interviewing subject(s)*.

One defended subject: two defended subjectivities

Hollway and Jefferson, this volume, argue convincingly that how we interpret interview material depends on our theory of the individual subject, and that much social science research analysis implies a self-knowledgeable and potentially transparent self. Against this implicit model, they argue for a psychoanalytically informed model of subjectivity as being always engaged in unconscious defences against anxiety. Such a model entails the assumption that the interviewee is always 'motivated not to know' certain things about themselves and always produces 'self-defensive' biographical accounts, told stories, which avoid such knowledge.

I would only add that, in an interview, there are two anxious defended subjects, not one.⁴ In the interview, the *researcher also* must be assumed to be at least potentially 'motivated to not know' certain things that would be upsetting for him or her, and thus subtly or obviously influencing the production of some or all of the text of the interview. In addition, the researcher's anxieties do not vanish after the end of the interview. They may even be exacerbated. Defence and anxiety are features of the researcher-position right through data-analysis and into writing-up and publication. The operation of such anxiety in the stages of analysis and interpretation cannot be avoided, but its shape and implications need to be detected and combatted.⁵

This is best done by using a panel of analysts. The value of a panel of analysts and of peer review lies in part in the capacity of different researchers to have anxieties that are different from those of each other and from that of the interviewee. Well handled, the material that the

interviewer is 'motivated not to understand' or 'motivated to understand only in a certain way' may be better understood through the discussion among peers in the interview-analysis panel. The more intercultural and cross-cultural the panel, the more 'sleeping assumptions' (Cooper, this volume) of any given researcher are likely to be disturbed and raised to consciousness, thereby often forcing a clarification and a rectification of the researcher's theory of subjectivity.

The lived life and the told story

To go beyond the defended discourse of the told story of any informant, we must be able to put that self-presentation in the context of other knowledge. To illustrate the way that biographical research develops such knowledge even from within interview material, we can consider the explicit procedure of one research tradition. Several of the studies in this volume (Jones and Rupp, Chamberlayne and Spanò, King, Schiebel) were developed on the basis of narrative interviews structured and panel-analysed according to the 'biographic-interpretive method' referred to as BIM.

The BIM methodology rests upon the sharp distinction, within the material of the interview, between the data of the lived life and the structure of the told story. These are separately analysed, and afterwards the results of the two analyses of the separate materials are brought together.

- 1 The *lived life* is composed of the uncontroversial hard biographical data⁶ that can be abstracted from the interview material and any other helpful source. This is seen as a long chronological sequence of the 'objective' historical facts about the person's life, the life-events as they happened, independently of whether or how they are referred to in the interview.
- 2 The *told story* is the way that the person presents him or herself – both in their initial narrative and in their answers to specific questions – by selecting certain events in their life (and omitting others) and by handling them in a certain way (and not in another).

'Understanding' the 'told story' in BIM involves the researcher interpreting that told story in the context of knowledge about the other elements on Scheff's part/whole ladder, including the lived life. The story that is told in the interview text – typically but not always in the form of a biographic narration – must be understood in terms of the history of the lived life that it is about and out of which it springs. This requires a theory of the relation of told stories to the historically evolving and conditioned subjectivity that tells them. Consequently an account of the narrating

subjectivity relating a told story at a given moment needs to be placed within the history of the lived life and the historical contextualisations required by Scheff's ladder of smallest parts-largest wholes. Much biographical-interpretive work does not, of course, go anything like as far as Scheff's 'maximalist' model would recommend: for example, not every case-study has to 'place' a particular case within the history of the human species! However, Scheff would argue that, to the extent to which such work is not done, there is at least a potential failure in objective understanding. To complement that, I would argue that the more explicit and subject to rectification are the presumptions about past and future historical reality, about the contemporary world picture made and assumed within the interpretation, the more 'objective' the analysis is likely to be.

The limits of recycling or decontextually analysing the told story/interview text

Without a contextualisation of the 'told story' by the lived life and other Scheff elements, the analyst can do little more than recycle the story as told in a more naive or more sophisticated form. I shall use the concept of 'formal-textualism'⁷ to refer to any tendency of research that attempts to avoid going beyond the limits of the text. I have already mentioned the journalistic attempt to stay with the (lightly edited) words of the interviewee, and merely recycle them for the reader (as in the work of Studs Terkel). A similar attempt to stay within the text characterises some practices of contemporary discourse analysis. However, I would argue that, in its applied uses, even discourse analysis tends to have to confront questions of context and subjectivity.

For example, in Corinne Squire's insightful and stimulating chapter in this volume which gets very close to a solely textual analysis, she is obliged to assume a model of subjective reality and one of objective reality in order to make some of the points that she wishes to make about the texts as 'mediated speech'.⁸

She presumes a model of subjectivity in relation to text-delivery in at least two places. First, when she argues that 'To live with HIV is to live with abjection insistently and repetitively; interviewees' story genres provided a way both to register abjection, and to continue around it', she makes an assertion about the subjective experience of 'living with HIV' and discusses the 'registering' (or not) of such abjection. A language of subjectivity and psychic states is clearly and necessarily being used. Second, although she argues that one should not 'treat language as a more or less transparent route to subjectivity', her general argument does include a passage with a different implication:

In order to examine narrative language and its effects on subjectivity, the study focused on narrative genre, a category that foregrounds specific structures of language. Such genres also provide a fairly concrete way of looking at the relationships between subjectivity and the cultural sphere, since they are articulated in both.

How are 'effects on subjectivity' to be assessed if no independent route to subjectivity is identified? For that matter, how are the effects of subjectivity on language to be assessed, either? Knowledge of subjectivity has crept in by the back door, after having been, more or less, dismissed from the front! The moment one wishes to make inferences from the text to the subjectivity of the individual producing the text – even that of living with abjection – one is obliged to presume or to build a model of individual subjectivity and a model of the possible modes of text-production that such a subjectivity might engage in.

Squire's goal is to 'treat the stories really as stories, as expressions of cultural genres, not just as unmediated speech'. I agree that the 'subjectivity' cannot be simply read as 'given' by the stories, but argue that stories are not just 'mediated speech' but that also 'genre-mediated speech' itself mediates experience, for example, the experience of 'living with HIV' that she has asserted is an experience of 'living with abjection'.

In addition, the text-analysis also presumes a model of historical-social objective context. Squire's account of John's account of his phone calls and of his coming-out narrative (pp.203–4) involves her treating and evaluating the accounts as 'realistic' in a way that 'pure' formal discourse analysis would avoid. Squire says that she knows that John would not be allowed to do some of the things that real doctors can do. Common understandings of medical power and the power of laymen are assumed between Squire and the reader. Knowledge of the external real is presumed and used to interpret the significance of the text.

The strength of her argument depends in part upon the assumptions about subjectivity and the knowledge of external context which support the very valuable insights she wishes to convey about genre and its mediating function. The point I am making here is Scheff's point, namely that, if we wish to 'understand' the text,⁹ it is very hard to sustain a consistent refusal to use knowledge about subjectivity or about contextual reality and actual history.

The 'diamond model': four components in relation

My argument so far is that the implicit model of all biographical research and the explicit methodology of BJM contrasts the history of the lived life

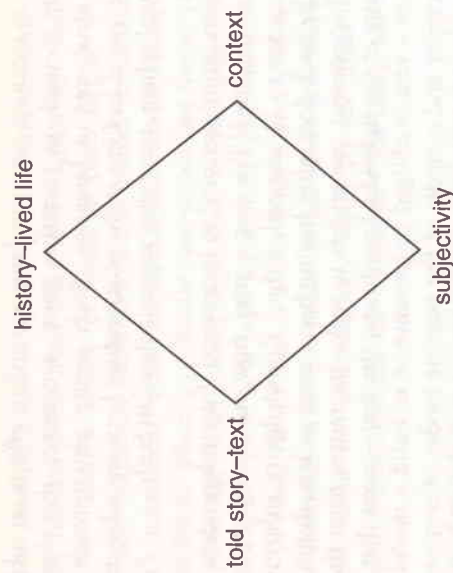


Figure 7.1 The four implicit components of biographical research: diamond model

and the *text of the told story*. I have added two further items: Scheff's general argument about understanding requiring a knowledge of *historical and comparative context*, and Hollway and Jefferson's stress on the significance of the *researcher's general model of (text-producing) subjectivity* within an *intersubjective interview*.

Better understanding of a given text requires considerable knowledge about contexts, history and subjectivity, as well as knowledge about texts. These four components are represented in Figure 7.1 above.

Understanding of biographic interview material, and particularly of narrative, requires us to be conscious of these four *implicit components*, and of the way we think they interact. Our image of these four components and how they interact governs the way that the particular interview text is read and understood by the researcher.

Resources for typification and generalisation *within* single-case research

Both novice and seasoned researchers find it difficult to determine the procedures necessary for comparing cases, and, though there is considerable literature on the analysis of interview interaction and the analysis of each case taken separately, there is much less on the still mysterious processes of comparative interpretation (Wolcott 1994; Wengraf 1998).

I argue, however, that it is, luckily, impossible to produce a report on a particular case – or to read such a report – without implicitly comparing

other possible and actual cases and without certain universal concepts for describing and understanding cases being more or less strongly implied by the text and by the act of reading.

If this can be shown, then there is no *logical jump or discontinuity* involved in moving from single-case to multiple-case analysis. Neither is there a particular difficulty in moving from the particularities of a single case to general concepts suitable for comparative work and for generalisation, since some general concepts were already employed to evoke and make sense of the particular case.

The biographic-interpretive method (BIM) of analysing biographic narrative interviews renders explicit what is implicit in other less elaborated and formalised approaches to analysis. I am arguing that this can usefully be formulated as a procedure. The aspect I am particularly concerned with is the use in biographical researching of the general procedure of grounded theorising, as developed originally by Glaser and Strauss (1967). A name which they gave to the practice I wish to highlight here is that of the 'constant comparative method'. This involves two stages: first, the multiplication of hypotheses around any given datum until the imagination and knowledge of the researchers is exhausted; second, the consideration as to whether the next datum being examined eliminates any of the previous hypotheses to be eliminated. Strauss (1987) gives useful examples of this process of the multiplication of hypotheses and the subsequent attempt to consider which have been falsified¹⁰ and Bertaux (this volume) in a footnote evokes the application of this 'guessing game' in a classroom situation.

In BIM, this two-stage procedure is applied twice: to the sequence of events in the lived life, and to the sequence of narrative expression within the interview text.

While the events of the lived life form a natural chronological sequence, the principles of *sequentialising the told story*, the interview text as 'emitted', are less obvious. There are two main dimensions of sequentialising the told story: *themes raised* and the *text-sorts* in terms of which themes or parts of them are treated. We cannot go into detail here, but in general, the process is described by G. Rosenthal (1998).

In analysing their biographical self-presentations, or life-stories, what we are aiming to achieve is an analysis of the biographer's present perspective. We interpret in what form, i.e. at what point of the text, they speak about certain parts of their lives, and we reconstruct the mechanisms behind the themes they choose to talk about and the experiences they choose to tell. We assume that it is by no means coincidental and insignificant when biographers *argue* about one

phase of their lives, but *narrate* another at great length, and then give only a brief *report* of yet another part of their lives or *describe* the circumstances of their lives in detail.

(Rosenthal 1998: 4–5)

The life-sequentialisation and the text-sequentialisation are 'processed' by interpretive panels of co-researchers quite separately but according to the same principle. The common principle is described by Breckner as follows:

The starting point is an empirical phenomenon [in our case an event or a segment of text] which is to be explained by a general rule formulated as an hypothesis. The core of the abductive program is to construct alternative hypotheses to explain a given empirical datum. The analyst is invited to think about all possible hypotheses, each of which could be regarded as sufficient to explain the empirical phenomenon.... A prediction is made about what later data are likely to follow if the general rule embodied in that hypothesis about datum D were true.

(Breckner 1998: 93, modified)

As each new datum in the series is examined (*the next event in the life or the next theme or text-sort change in the told story*), then there is a search back to see which of the hypotheses previously put forward – 'later occurrence' or 'following' hypotheses – can be *falsified* by this new datum. This having been done, there is then a search back to see which surviving hypotheses have been *strengthened* by this new datum. This having been done, then further new hypotheses are developed around the significance of the new datum, together with predictions – new 'later occurrence hypotheses' or 'following hypotheses' – about what will occur later in the series were such new hypotheses to turn out to be correct. And so on, to the end of the series.¹¹

A record of such a grounded theory procedure as applied to a sequence of biographical data can be found in Breckner 1998; and, as applied to sequences of text data, in Schiebel and in Jones and Rupp in this volume.

The question of formalising the development of such 'later occurrences' might be represented by a diagram. The task of multiplying hypothetical possibilities for the individual biographical datum is precisely that of inventing any and all possibilities that the social and cultural knowledge of the panel can come up with. They are creatively proliferated; not systematically organised. They might look like Figure 7.2.

At each datum-point, a number of (dotted line) hypotheses are developed. The subsequent datum either suggests that one of these were correct

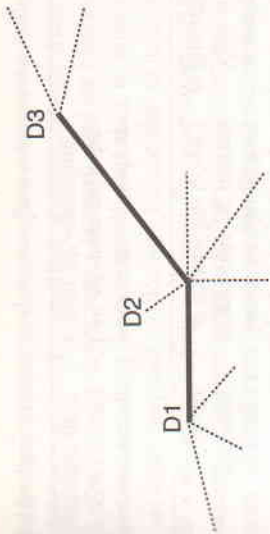


Figure 7.2 Later occurrences diagram at point D3

or that a new one needs to be retrospectively constructed.... and that the hypotheses which remain unsupported or even refuted by later occurrences remain as unrealised possibilities of life-events or text-sequences in the particular case being studied. Realised (confirmed) hypotheses are represented by a solid line; unrealised (unconfirmed or refuted) ones remain as dotted lines.¹²

Multiplying contingencies for cases, multiplying types for typologies

How does this procedure for multiplying contingencies for a particular case support the development of types and typologies? I shall show below that comparative questions and comparative knowledge are inherent in our understanding of a given case as expressed in a case report. I shall show that, in the very description of particular cases, general concepts are also involved.

In Table 7.1, I have taken an extract from a case report on an East German, 'Sophie', reported upon by Astrid Segert and Irene Zierke (see their chapter, this volume) and have attempted to show some of the implicit comparative questions that can arise when reading it and some of the universal concepts in terms of which the description of the single case is couched.

- 1 The first column contains the propositions of the case report.
- 2 The second has to do with comparative questions that prod one to think 'What might have happened to Sophie – or to someone in some respects like Sophie – if...?'
- 3 The third column identifies organising general concepts more or less strongly implied in the case report discourse, general concepts which are necessarily available for describing all other cases.

Table 7.1 Implicit comparisons and universal concepts in Sophie's case report

Case report	Comparative questions to help think about the focal, and possibly other, cases	Some organising universal societal concepts implied in the case report extract
Born at the beginning of the 1950s, she is twice married and has a son.	Cohort experience of current 50-year-olds in East Germany; twice-married, why? and what are the implications of having a son? (of what age?)	Birth Marriage Children
She comes from a vicar's family who experienced the political repression of both the Fascist and the GDR period.	What about vicars' families who do not have that experience? What is the significance of having that experience? What about those who have the experience of repression but come from non-vicar's families? What happened in that part of Germany during the Fascist period? What happened during the GDR period? What is meant by repression in the two contexts?	Family of origin – types of families Father's? occupation Periods of history Types of society Repression and its absence – political and other repressions
Belonging to a politically marginalised church, the family lived in modest circumstances.	What is the significance of 'non-modest circumstances'? Were there vicar's families who lived in better/in worse circumstances? What might be the different effects?	Churches Organisations – marginalised or not Circumstances – better than, or worse than, modest
They preserved their high education standards, cultural values and close social connections to like-minded others.	In a different location or situation, or even in the same one, similar families might not have been able to achieve such 'preservation', or at least not all of them. Implications of different patterns of non-preservation?	Family culture preserved or not Education standards – high/medium/low Cultural values – variable Social connections to like-minded and other than like-minded – close/distant

To some of the comparative questions, the researcher-writer or the reader may have definite and well-grounded answers. Particularly if he or she does not yet know much about East Germany and its history, the chances are that other answers may be tentative, and that to many of the questions one can only respond – like any researcher in a new field at the beginning of a research project – 'I must find out more'. Also implicit in the case-description are universal concepts being applied. There are presumed theories of child and personal development, of family/non-family relations, of types of society and types of family and societal regime operating: how well grounded are they? Again, research may be needed.

In considering Table 7.1, you may wish to refer back to the 'later occurrences diagram', Figure 7.2.

I wish to stress here that, when we suggest possible 'later particular occurrences' in the case of a particular individual, we are very close to suggesting possible *later types of occurrence* in a *typology of classes of individuals*.¹³

For example, taking an imaginary case, 'Raymond', we suggest that the biographical datum of a divorce from Mary might be followed by an affair with Suzie or by an intensification of an old friendship with Clement. This is very close to suggesting a generalisation that, for some men, the breakdown of a marital relationship may be followed by the development of a new sexual relationship or by the development of an old non-sexual relationship. The 'later occurrences diagram' of branching possibilities is the same: the difference is that the names on the branches are 'abstract' rather than 'proper' names.

The closeness between multiplying *particular alternatives for particular people* and multiplying *typical alternatives for typical people* might be even greater. It may be that it was our general sense that came first; that we applied a general set of typical possibilities and probabilities to the particular case of Raymond, a general sense or set derived from experience, stereotypes, fictional works (see Rustin, this volume) and our social science imagination, of what a certain type of person is likely to do in particular types of situation. Perhaps previously existing typifications in our heads produced the prediction of possible alternative 'later occurrences' for the particular case?

If the actual sequence of agents and actions in this new particular life-world requires us to rethink our pre-existing sense of personal and historical possibilities and probabilities, then new cases are interesting to the extent that they force our previous mental models¹⁴ into consciousness and then force us to revise and improve them.

My argument is that we already have a complex, many-branching, usually not very coherent, tacit typology of agents and actions and situations in our heads *before* we start to make sense of a new particular case,

and we use those typifications to make sense of the new particular case by applying it to the unique particular life-world of the particular person, their *idiotwese*.¹⁵ This tacit, usually not very coherent typology, like the organising universal concepts implied in particular case descriptions, these mental models, are implicit resources available for subsequent explicit comparison between cases.

If we take the case of Sophie, she comes from a vicar's family who experienced the political repression of both the Fascist and the GDR period in East Germany. Our speculations about what possible 'shapings of the biographic life experience' might be true for Sophie might include predictions that repression would demoralise the family of origin and turn her into a cynical opportunist. In terms of the 'later occurrences diagram', this might be a dotted line hypothesis. The last cited item in the extract from the case report indicates that this hypothesis was *not* born out in Sophie's case: the family preserved their high education standards, cultural values and close social connections to like-minded others. *Refuted for Sophie, this hypothesis remains as a potential line of development for cases other than Sophie's* that might have been analysed already or might be considered later on. Every later occurrence hypothesis suggests a 'type of outcome' that might not be true in the case under consideration but might be true of some other case. Alternative 'particular later occurrences' suggest types of occurrence in an implicit typology that can be made explicit and thus function as a first resource for explicit comparative understanding.

In the first part of this chapter, I argued that there is a connection between the implicit four components involved in the understanding of any particular biographical case – the history of the lived life and the text of the told story, the evolving context and the inferred subjectivity of the interviewee – and that these often implicit components – together with the subjectivity of the researcher – are best made explicit. In the second part of this chapter, I argued two points, both exemplified in the Sophie example. The first was that the practice of imagining different 'later occurrences' within the lifecourse of the particular biographical individual was closely connected to the researchers' stock of known and imagined (types of) events, actions, situating contexts and outcomes, depended on that (typological) stock and might well contribute towards enriching it. The second point was that the researchers could move up the spectrum of generality–specificity from their account of a particular case, uncovering the general concepts necessarily implied by their particular case description, and turning later occurrence statements (with proper names and dates in them) to statements of types of possibility (without proper names and dates).

In the following section of this chapter, I will bring together the argu-

ments of the first two sections, and then end with a discussion of the types of typologies.

Differences/typologies between the particular and the general

Typologies – implicit or explicit – lie between the general and the particular: they can be regarded as the formalisation of real and imagined historical difference. I would argue that one can think more clearly if no hard epistemological line is drawn between descriptions of difference and typologies of difference, since none is justified. However, in any particular research process the typologies will be seen in different ways.

- Seen from 'above', from the point of view of the general and abstract orienting concepts, ideal types or typologies¹⁶ function as *specifications of the general concepts* in their movement towards the particular.
- However, from the point of view of the particular case descriptions, such ideal types or typologies function as *generalisations from particular cases* in the movement of thought towards greater generality. Most qualitative researchers into biographic materials tend to develop their sense of differences within lives and between cases from the ground *upwards*; we turn knowledge of concrete particulars into implicit typologies into explicit ones, and then attempt to clarify the general concepts that – as I showed with the Sophie example, above – were inherent at the previous levels.

Now can we summarise the relation between the particular and the general, and the relation between multiple possible occurrences and multiple possible types?

Spradley distinguishes (1979: 210) six levels of proposition that can be found in an ethnographic text. I use a reduced version of this to suggest the importance of levels of abstraction (see Table 7.2).

Presenting the 'diamond' model of the four necessary components of biographical research (p.148 above), I argued that, even if only one

Table 7.2 Modified Spradley three-level model: differentiating concepts between the general and the particular

Level	
1	Universal concepts for all societies
2	Differentiating concepts
3	Specific concepts for specific cases

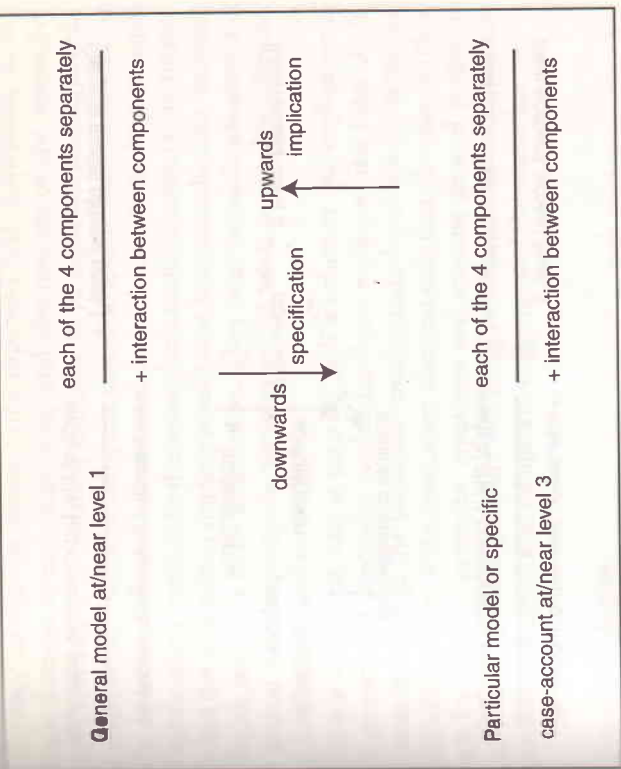


Figure 7.4 The four interacting components at two Spradley levels (1 and 3)

The model needs to be enriched still further. Returning to the middle one of my modified version of Spradley above, between the general and the particular lie multiple indications of difference: there are contingent statements close to level 3 and relatively formalised typologies close to level 1. In this intermediate zone, too, the four components – lived life, told story, context, subjectivity – and their relations remain mutually implied to some extent or explicitly spelled out. As I have argued earlier, the description of multiple possible contingencies (as in the later occurrence hypothesising) is directly related to implied multiple typologising. Statements of 'type' differences are higher in the level of abstraction than statements of 'occurrence' or contingency differences, as is suggested by Figure 7.5 on the next page.

Summarising, my argument has been, first, that the four components of the diamond model are *horizontally implicated* with each other at each level. Second, that any account of any and all of the components at the level of case description involves a model of the most general sort: consequently, there is a line of *vertical mutual implication*, as well. Third, that there is no hard epistemological line but rather a spectrum between level 1 (universal) and level 3 (specific particularity).

component was the focus of the research effort, all the other three were implicit and should be consciously attended to. At the level of case description, each of the components needed to be addressed and related to each other: history – lived life; told-story, the text; subjectivity; and context, *all of one particular person*. The model of a particular case involves: (a) describing each of the four components; and (b) relating them to each other in the way that they are specified for that person, at that time, producing that story, from their lived life in that context in that epoch. Each of the four components needs to be described *separately* in individually particular ways ('thick description', Geertz 1973). In addition, how they are supposed to have *interacted* to produce the biography in the particular case must also be described in the same way. Such a '4-components interacting' particular description operates at the level of concrete particulars with Spradley level-3 statements. This is summarised in Figure 7.3.

However, inherent in any *particular description* are *general models* of each component and their relationships. To make a particular statement about Sophie's subjectivity in telling the story, we *have to have had* a general model of 'subjectivities in general and their possible relations to the other three components'; to give a particular account of evolution of the societal-historical context of Germany from, say, 1939 to 1998, we *have to have had* a general model of 'societal-historical contexts and their possible relations to the other three components', etc.

Such implicit or explicit '4-components interacting' general models of subjectivity, text, context, history are Spradley level-1 models; the third column of the Sophie-diagram indicated a list of some of these.

My argument is that to describe any or all of the four components that are to be found interacting in any *particular* historical case (Spradley level 3), the researcher is obliged to be using implicit *general* models at or closer to Spradley level 1. *Without general concepts/models* of subjectivity, of context, of lived lives, of told stories, and of the possible interaction of such components, *no accounts of particular instances* could be generated. This homology is shown in Figure 7.4.

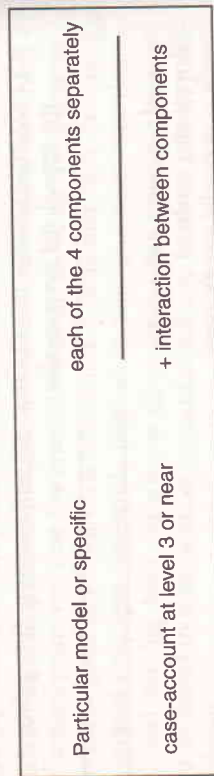


Figure 7.3 The four components at case-description level (Spradley level 3)

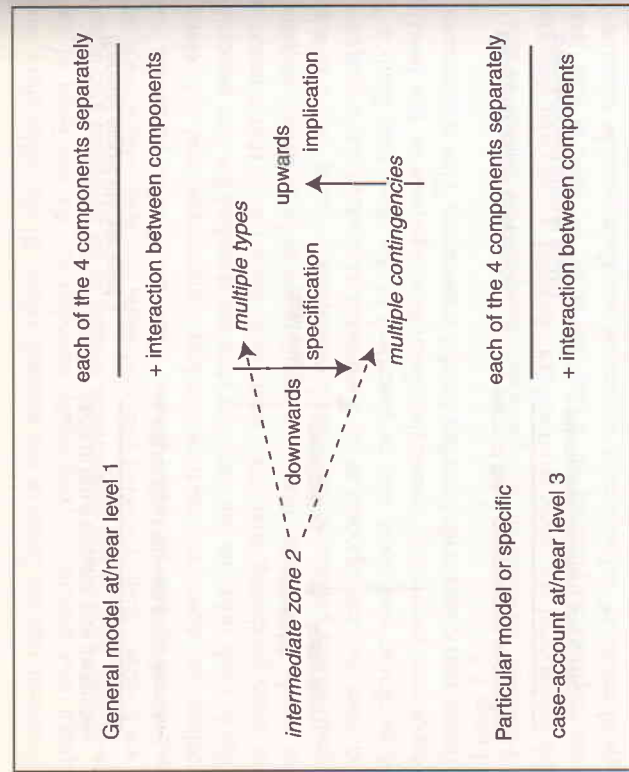


Figure 7.5 The four interacting components at three Spradley levels

I wish to address one further point, before considering types of typologies. The resources of conceptualised knowledge with which the multiple contingencies of later occurrences were developed in the analysis of sequences of life and sequences of text in a single case imply resources of generality and of typification that need to be made explicit and thus liable to correction and improvement. Such resources of generality and typification as operating in the analysis of one/the first case have the great advantage that they are part of the 'system of relevancy and thinking' of the researcher doing the work of case-description at level 3.

However confused and incoherent the cultural common sense (Gramsci 1957: 58–9; 1971: 323–5) of the researcher may be from which these resources have been taken, emerging from his or her own individual and professional biography, the selection and utilisation of such resources of generality and typification by the researcher in his or her case-description means that they are the raw materials from which *that researcher* can best develop a clearer and more coherent set of interlocking general models and particular descriptions. The stages, the necessity and difficulty of that iterative struggle are brought out in this volume by Cooper. Just as the uninterrupted narrative interview enables the 'system

of relevancy' of the interviewee to be expressed and understood, so the multiple later-occurrence arguments and descriptions of the researcher enable the researcher's 'systems of relevancy' to be expressed and improved.

I would argue that, after doing the case-descriptions and before looking at the indefinitely large field of social research literature, the typologies and typifications implicit in the researcher's multiplication of contingencies, and the generalities implicit in all his or her particular case-accounts produced, need first to be attended to. They must be made adequate and the general and the particular models must be made reasonably coherent, both horizontally and vertically.¹⁷

Once a reasonable stab at creating such a coherent and explicit set of such general and particular models has been made, on the basis of the resources internal to the particular case(s) studied and the concerns and system of relevancy of the researcher, then, *but only then*, the more explicit search for existing particular typologies and existing general models in social science research literature will invigorate rather than crush the now reasonably well-developed comparative apparatus of the researcher.

Types of typologies

If typologies either determine or exist virtually within real or imagined contingent historical differences, and if they depend upon and feed general concepts at Spradley level 1, can we develop a typology of typologies? Layder (1998) has argued strongly and persuasively for the need to develop typologies and distinguishes between typologies of action (behaviour) and typologies of system (structure), stressing the danger of restricting research to typologies of action:

Action or behavioural typologies restrict themselves largely to the depiction of lifeworld elements of society concerning subjective meaning, lived experience, motivations, attitudes and so on. The importance of *system or structural typologies* is that they concern themselves with depicting the settings and contexts of behaviour and thus provide the necessary requirements for more inclusive and powerful explanations of social life.... It is also crucial to emphasise the important role that structural or system typologies may play in research; otherwise, their influence on the behaviour or people in question will be vague and partial, or treated as an implicit, inchoate backdrop to the analysis.... (Layder 1998: 74–5)

Given that those drawn to biographical interview-based research are likely to be spontaneously oriented towards action-alternatives or subjectivity-alternatives, Scheff and Layard's insistence on the importance of *context-alternatives* is salutary. The socio-biographical work developed in SOSTRIS develops our 'sense of context' (SOSTRIS 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b; Chamberlayne and Spano, Rustin, this volume) and these lay the ground – as I have argued above – for richer typologies of context.

Three more distinctions perhaps need to be made to enrich Layard's model, an alternative to the 'diamond' model presented earlier.

First, since our concern here is with biographic research in the social sciences, I think it important to distinguish the level of the biological 'individual'. Obviously, it would be possible to treat the individual subject as a particular type of 'system' contextualising the text, but for convenience I think it useful to distinguish the individual actor, or 'subjectivity' from other features of context.

Second, in addition to this important distinction, I think it necessary to add another, that between relatively *synchronic* typologies – where the typology is of different actions or systems treated in an ahistorical fashion – and relatively *diachronic* typologies – where the typology is of the historical development of a sequence of actions (like a history of community, family, or individual actions) or of the historical development of a system or structure of greater or lesser scope.¹⁸

Third, it is perhaps important to identify the 'told story' text – or even the whole of the interview text – as a distinct object for theorising.

The net effect of these distinctions is to yield the following table:

Table 7.3 Textual, individual, action and system typologies – eight-fold table

<i>That which can be typologised (theorised)</i>	<i>The temporal dimension of the typology (theory)</i>
(Interview) Textual	Synchronic at a given 'moment'
Individual – subjectivity	Diachronic over a sequence of 'moments'
Action – behavioural	I V
System – structural	II VI
	III VII
	IV VIII

My argument about biographising would be that particular accounts, typologies and general models of a synchronic nature (column 1) should always serve and lead towards accounts, typologies, and generalities of a diachronic nature (column 2).

Conclusion

I have tried to show that, in order to understand an interview text, one has to do, but go beyond, an analysis of the text itself. Naive or sophisticated recycling does not produce understanding. I have put forward a diamond model of the four interacting components of understanding.

I have tried to show that within particular accounts of real and imagined historical differences of action, context and so forth, there exist virtual types, typologies and orienting concepts (Layard), which are resources for understanding the particular cases and all other cases: these are generated in the dialogue between the interviewee's self-expression and the researcher's frame of reference.

In conclusion, I have suggested two different formulations of the (usually implicit) 'general models' that are to be found in the (usually explicit) models of the particular. One is based on the 'diamond' model at the different levels of abstraction suggested by Spradley; the other, the eight-fold typology of typologies, is based on Layard.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Joanna Borna, Prue Chamberlayne, Jeff Evans, Amal Treacher, Lisa Blackwell and Margaret Lipscomb for their comments on earlier drafts.
- 2 What we, like Scheff, tend to take as the natural empirically given concrete realities are probably better seen as a mixture of universal human assumptions and constraints as mediated through historico-cultural assumptions and constraints of a specific general and disciplinary culture at a specific time within a civilisation and a (natural language) socio-linguistic community.
- 3 See Wengraf 1999 for a further discussion of this point.
- 4 'In every consulting room, there ought to be two rather frightened people; the patient and the psychoanalyst. If they are not, one wonders why they are bothering to find out what everyone knows' (Bion 1974: 13, cited in Casement 1985: 4).
- 5 Schiebel (this volume) identifies a collusion in not-knowing between herself and an older German man, and ascribes this to a specifically German culturally prescribed 'defensiveness in communication'. However, if we accept a model of subjectivity with the Hollway and Jefferson's defended self and Cooper's assumption (both, this volume) of sleeping and normally invisible cultural assumptions, then all communication in all cultures will involve defensiveness in communication.
- 6 If there is or could be a controversy, then the postulated 'datum' is not 'hard enough', and is left out!

- 7 Hollway and Jefferson (this volume) refer to this as 'inter-textualism'.
- 8 I am indebted to Corinne Squire for clarification on this point.
- 9 So would be a refusal to use any new knowledge gained from 'formal-textual' analysis to add to our knowledge and understanding of the other three components.
- 10 The history of the 'grounded theory movement' cannot be considered here. See Strauss and Corbin (1994) for a disguised polemic from one (dominant) side; Glaser (1992) for an overt polemic from the (not so dominant) other.
- 11 In *SOSTRIS Working Paper 2* there is an example of such hypothesis generation and hypothesis falsification/validation in respect of the biographical data of Tony on pp.94-6, and in respect of the analysis of the sequentialisation in the expression of a thematic field on pp.99-102.
- 12 This model is clearly a simplification. In actual practice, towards the start of the process a large number of hypotheses are generated and relatively few are refuted; towards the end of the process, there are a larger number of refutations and a smaller number of new hypotheses. Our concern in this chapter is the multiplication of imagined later occurrences.
- 13 The same is true in relation to texts, societal contexts, told stories, subjectivities. The reader may wish to pursue this argument which I have not space to develop here.
- 14 See Senge (1990: ch. 10) for a formal discussion of mental models.
- 15 A parallel argument holds true about imagining different ways - at each point in the text (sequence) a different topic/treatment might be chosen by the speaker, and what implications might be drawn from such patterns of recurrent choices. There is not space to develop this discussion of 'later occurrences' in the flow of interviewee speech.
- 16 We cannot here explore the distinction between 'collections of types' and 'typologies'. See Max Weber (1949) and Gerth and Mills (1948: 59-61) for discussion. The orientation to delivering understanding of particular historical cases is suggested by Weber's assertion that 'the goal of ideal-typical construction is always to make clearly explicit not the class or average character but rather the unique individual character' (Weber 1949: 101, cited Mommesen 1974: 10).
- 17 The need for such coherence is well brought out by Mason (1996: Ch. 1).
- 18 This model reduces the four components of the earlier diamond model to three, by eliminating 'the historical' as a separate category and adding the potentiality of a historical dimension to each of the other three components.

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