

The Relationship Dynamic between Researchers and Subjects in the Biographical Interview : A Case Study in a Greek University

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the issue of the relationship dynamic between researchers and subjects within the framework of the conduct of a biographical narrative interview, which is used as a research tool in research in the field. Essentially, it endeavours to contribute to the social researcher's feedback, through a critical dimension for thought on the research self. It aims at the investigation of the attitudes of professors (informants) at the University of Patras, concerning the influence that the position of the researcher in the university field exerts during the conduct of a biographical narrative interview, as well as the appraisal, on the part of the informants, of this influence, in order for them to narrate, think and reflect on the teaching act, at the University of Patras in Greece. More specifically, we attempted to approach and investigate the important matter of the entry of the researcher into the research field during empirical research of a qualitative nature. To analyse the attitudes of the informants, the concepts of "scientific field", "scientific capital" and "symbolic power" from P. Bourdieu's theory were used. The research was carried out in the years 2013-2014 with the use of the biographical narrative interview in which eight professors of various academic levels and Schools at the University of Patras participated. The research results showed that the informants' narrative was facilitated by the position of the researcher in the field under investigation. It even emerged that knowledge of the "game" being played within the university field on the part of the researcher, as well as her position in relation to the informants, made her communication with them more efficient.

Key words: biographical research, biographical narrative interview, bourdieu, scientific capital

1 Theoretical Framework

Biographical research, as a scientific method, creates a framework for the study and comparison of subjective-individual and collective-intersubjective, historical-social reality. Thus, it places the biographical data in the form of a dialogue together with their historical and social environments and that is why biographies are seen more as a social "construct" than as material for access to a subjective perspective (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1990; Alheit, 1994; Tsiolis, 2006).

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For Bakhtin the words and expressions a narrator uses don't emerge from scratch from a unified, unique Cartesian mind that is narrated, of a unified and monotonous speaking body and only one voice. On the contrary, the words or expressions always emerge out of a dialogic relationship with other people (Bakhtin, 1981: 293-4). Thus Bakhtin claims that "*I realize myself through others. Those from whom I receive words, shapes, tonalities for the forming of my initial idea of myself. Just as the body is initially shaped in the mother's womb, the consciousness of the individual is awakened through the consciousness of the other*" (Bakhtin, 1986: 138).

Hermans claims that the self allows the Ego to contain a multiplicity of words and each word its own author who tells a story relatively independent of other authors and other words. The different voices function like the interacting characters of a novel, involved in processes of questioning, answering, agreement or conflict. Each different voice has a story to tell about its experience from a particular viewpoint on the world, since, "*the organization of the self lies primarily in the ability of the ego to move while describing in words the positions which it is placed in each time. In other words the Ego has the capacity to express itself, giving a voice to each position permitting the establishment of dialogic relationships between the positions the self takes each time*" (Hermans, 1999: 133). In conclusion "*the different voices, exchange information on the corresponding Ego and Me, leading to a complex, narratively and dialogically constructed self*" (Hermans, 1996: 33).

According to Bourdieu's original view (1992: 131), in biographical research the story of a life constitutes a "social artefact", provided the researcher and the subject of the research/informant accept, out of "common interest" the signification of the narrative, thus engaging in "biographical self-deception". This view greatly helps in the methodological self-reflection of biographical research, while allowing the researchers, who adopt the principles of the reconstruction of the biographical research, to reflect firstly on the process of the biographical narrative interview and of the autobiographical speaker that is articulated within it. The narratives are understood and analysed as polyphonic and multimodal texts. This means that they don't have the character of a reproduction and a linear and coherent life narrative and so they attempt to contribute to the revision and not the consolidation of a biographical self-description or identity (Tsiolis, 2013: 423-425).

In order for reconstructive biographical research to avoid the danger of normalization and naturalization of the biographies, it seeks the detection of subjective structures of action and interpretation, the positions of the subject, his movements, his social mechanisms, the bio-historical and biographical elements of the Discourses, judging that it is impossible for us to understand the events through the narration of a life without bearing in mind "*the whole of the positions that are held simultaneously at a given moment in time by the biological beings*" (Bourdieu, 1994: 134-138).

It is just this approach to positions, in the particular case, that is realized in the concept of "scientific field". This concept signifies a social space of actions in which "the dominators and the dominated" try to maintain or change the distribution of the forms of capital particular to it (Bourdieu, 1992: 45). In other words a "game" takes place in the field. All the participants in the field need to believe in the game they play, while its existence and continuation require an overall and limitless "investment" (investissement) in it, just as in its stakes (Bourdieu, op.cit.: 45-46).

The scientific field, then, which as we highlight, constitutes a concept derived from the concept of field which is fundamental to Bourdieu's schema, is a social field with power relations between the acting subjects, stakes, benefits, interests and strategies. It is a site of

competition whose target is the “monopoly” of scientific status, the ability in other words of the acting subject to speak or act legally for the science, which is socially recognised in a determined body (Bourdieu, op. cit.: 86;). Right of entry to the “scientific field” for the new recruit is the adequacy of familiarised theoretical resources in the form of “scientific capital” (Bourdieu, 2007a: 119). The capital in question constitutes a particular kind of symbolic capital, which is founded in acts of knowledge and recognition by the whole of the fellow craftsmen competitors within the folds of the scientific field in which he is involved (Bourdieu, op.cit.: 130; Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014).

According to Bourdieu (2003: 282), it is not necessary for the researcher in the research field to become “immersed” in an unknown field and embrace evaluative neutrality, which offers him objectivity and makes him distant, as much from himself as from the object of his research. On the contrary, he recommends the mobilization of his experience in all his research actions, since: “*...scientific knowledge and knowledge of self and the social unconscious go hand in hand and the primary experience, which is transformed in the framework and through scientific practice, transforms in turn scientific practice and vice versa...*” (Bourdieu, 2007a: 289). This is perhaps the reason, which Bourdieu proposes, why we should view the interview as a kind of intellectual exercise, with the aim of achieving a real transformation in the way we see others in real life conditions.

Moreover for Bourdieu symbolic power is a form of power that is exercised on the bodies: “*...indirectly, as if by magic, beyond every physical coercion, as a switch, in other words with minimal waste of energy*” (Bourdieu, 2007b: 86). It is an invisible power which demands the consent of those who don’t want to know that it is there or that they practise it (Bourdieu 1999: 238). The scientific type of symbolic power is exercised only over acting subjects (in this case the actors within the scientific field of the University of Patras) who possess those categories of perception that allow them to know it and to recognise it, while it cannot be exercised over the public unless it has been ratified by other scientists who silently control access to the “wider public”, chiefly through popularization (Bourdieu 2007b: 128-129).

In social research of a qualitative nature, the course through which the researcher enters, knows and learns the social world being studied constitutes simultaneously an indication of the structure and characteristics, hierarchies and relationships which exist within it and which give the particular scientific field its constituent parts (Angrosino, 1989; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Denzin, 1997; Savvakis & Tzanakis, 2004).

In this paper we attempted to study the influence of the position and attitude of the researcher in the scientific field of the University of Patras in Greece, regarding the issue of cooperation with professors from the University during the conduct of interviews using the biographical method. Observing the way the participants observe the researcher, we highlighted crucial points which the informants seem to highlight in the context of the interaction between researcher/researched and which influence, to a degree, the outcome of the final research project, revealing at the same time structural characteristics of the field being studied. Herzfeldt (1998: 117) points out that participatory observation ceases to exist if we see it as a situation significantly different to that of people under observation. We are participatory observers when and if we are prepared to recognise the same title in our informants (Riga, Papadodima & Ravanis, 2012).

The object of our interviews was to detect the influence of the teaching and scientific journey of these professors in their educational beliefs and practices, with the aim of searching for the signification of their discourse in a biographical perspective (Grawitz, 1981).

2 Methodological Framework

On the methodological level the biographical approach which places emphasis on the viewpoint of the acting subjects and on the subjective employment of social phenomena was chosen (Plummer, 2000; Mertens, 2005; Tsiolis, 2006; Thompson, 2008). The research was conducted in the years 2013 and 2014 with the use of the biographical narrative interview (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Ochberg, 1994; Beverley, 2000; Rosenthal, 2006). Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed while the process of their interpretative approach and the analysis of the biographical texts was based on the principle of the “case reconstruction” (Tsiolis, 2006: 188).

The research sample was made up of eight professors from the University of Patras (4 women and 4 men) from various schools and scientific specializations. The sample selection was made with the strategy of snowball sampling or chain sampling (Tsiolis, 2006: 173; 2014: 58; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008: 173-174).

The researcher was a PhD student at the University of Patras and during the biographical interviews she adopted an explicit stance of directing the general references made by the informants to their more precise educational attitudes.

In this paper we attempted to provide an answer to two basic research questions :

- (a) *What are the informants' views regarding the influence the position of the researcher (PhD student) exerts in the field of the university, in their collaboration with her within the context of the biographical narrative interview?*

This question is significant as the different status of the informants and the researcher, is expected to cause difficulties in communication, with the result that data collection takes place on terms that damage the validity and reliability of the fundamental research. The prototype of the dominance of the interviewer and the consent of the interviewee has been sufficiently documented in medical interviews where the power symmetry is particularly evident. What might happen when the reverse is true? (Mishler, 1996: 92).

- (b) *How do the informants assess the influence of the researcher's attitude in order for them to narrate, reflect and rethink in relation to the teaching act in the university field?*

This question approaches a special methodological issue. During the interviews, the researcher invites the informants to focus the discussion from the general issues in their biographies to issues concerning their teaching experience. However a question arises concerning the means of employment of this particular practice on the part of the researcher. In other words, is her practice understood as one of the consequences of the objective of the research or as a factor which upsets the unity of their thinking? In any case, as Bruner characteristically points out “*the story of a life as it is told to one specific individual is, in a deeper sense, a common product of he who narrates and he who listens. Whatever issue one touches on through the interview, must be evaluated through the prism of this interpersonal relationship*” (Bruner, 1997: 179).

3 Research Results

As far as the informants' views on the influence the researcher's position in the university

field exerts in the context of their collaboration during the conduct of a biographical narrative interview are concerned, it seems that along general lines, it was beneficial for communication. Analysing the informants' discourse, the main trend we recorded leads to the conclusion that the researcher's position² facilitated the informants in terms of a more critical and reflexive view of the issues under investigation. One professor states :

“the fact that the researcher is a member of the academic community (doctoral candidate) within the University of Patras, was positive in my opinion, because it ensured, first and foremost good communication as we speak a common language...” (13).

Based on a similar reflection, another professor adds :

“...because we, the research subjects, are teachers, we have evolved the technique, when we are to speak in some environment or other, whether the audience is multitudinous, or just one person, we usually ask what the other's background is. Here I didn't need to ask as I already knew and anyway it had been explained to me that the researcher was knowledgeable and involved and in addition being in the space meant she had understood plenty” (18).

Yet another professor mentioned that :

“...the interviewer had a wealth of information and speculation on the issue, as a result of reflection on her personal experience as a student or from studying in preparation for her doctoral thesis. I think these are the factors that made the discussion fertile and creative...” (17).

This view seems to be linked to Bourdieu's belief when he claims to be opposed to the principle of evaluative neutrality, stating that: *“...the researcher can and should mobilise his experience, from the past in other words, in all his research actions”* (Bourdieu, 2003: 291).

The reasoning of another professor appears to complement the views above :

“...so in order to transfer the information that the researcher requests you should supplement the necessary knowledge. In other words you have to provide him with the framework. In this case, it was a great help that the framework already existed and indeed it wasn't just the framework that was already there. There was also the knowledge due to the researcher's involvement in the field” (14).

In a different case a professor mentioned characteristically :

“...with someone from outside academic reality such a discussion would perhaps have been very difficult, if not impossible, because there is always the danger of paraphrasing...” (15).

The above narrative excerpt clearly demonstrates the importance of “participant objectivation”, as the researcher's position, which, according to Bourdieu (op.cit.: 282) aims at the objectivation of the subjective relationship with the object and constitutes one of the prerequisites for genuine scientific objectivation.

The negative stance of the informants to the possibility of the researcher's attitude being evaluatively neutral³ in a foreign environment, possessing the objectivity of the “remote look”

² In the scientific community, the issue of the researcher's position and attitude has been discussed (see: Tzanakis & Savvakis, 2007: 121) within the context of the biographical, but until now the informants' voices have not “been heard”.

of someone who remains just as removed from himself as from his object, is also observed across the whole of their responses (Bourdieu, op. cit.: 291).

In any case, as Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron claims (2009: 432-433), in order for the researcher to be able not only to see the world he is investigating but also in order to be able to speak about it, as it is, he must accept that he will always find himself within the complex and the vague, far away from and possibly in opposition to the view on intellectual precision and formulistic sociology.

On the question of how the informants evaluate the researcher's attitude, during the interviews, it appeared that her attitude was decisive in the production of the "discourse" of the faculty members through their narratives, as well in their thought and reflection. The researcher first of all "legitimized" her presence in the research field by asking the interviewees to constitute - assuming they wanted to - the informants within the framework of the creation of her doctoral thesis on the question: "*Modern Greek education in the thirty years 1950-1980 as Lived Experience and its biographical significance within the context of the practice of the academic role. Biographical transformations and educational practices of faculty members of the University of Patras*".

This took place as much to avoid the potential identification of the researcher with a journalist, as because participation in a piece of writing constitutes a primary incentive in narration and an affirmatively evaluative proposal which is not easily rejected (Denzin, 1989; Kleinman, 1995; Kaufman, 1996; Tzanakis & Savvakis, 2007).

The fact that the researcher was a member of the academic community at the University of Patras also contributed to the creation of a positive climate of communication. From the start of the collaboration and research activity, this fact led all the interviewees to agree to participatory observation, establishing, through the dialogue, a productive acquaintanceship and exchange of views. Theoretical sensitivity, respect for the participants, active listening and the conscious avoidance on the part of the researcher of excessive formality and research formalism, constituted the structural features of her attitude (Denzin, 1989; 1996). In any case Lydaki (2010: 217) points out that the relationship between researcher and interviewee demands reciprocity, parity and human interest in the discourse of the other.

More specifically, one professor mentions :

"...I believe she let me take a lot of initiative, there were very few interruptions that took my mind off the free flow of narrative. She left me completely free but the stimulus regarding what I had to bring up, she gave me the title, the research object and the researcher's background" (I8).

In addition, another professor states :

"the researcher's attitude was exploratory, she didn't make the mistake of expressing opinions - how could she in any case - and she was professional, in the sense that she created an environment, a condition in the other to remember and express. In other words she didn't impose a feeling: "come here and listen to me, after A comes B". We made it clear from the beginning that we could go backwards and forwards. So those were the 3 characteristics of the researcher: exploratory, professional, and supportive" (I4).

³ In other words the explicit assumptions cause the informant to reflect, something which confirms the theory regarding the value of the researcher's position and attitude (knowledgeable about the field, non-evaluative neutrality etc) and helps the researcher in his reflection.

More interest lies in the views of some professors regarding how the researcher's attitude influenced the promotion, through their narratives, of the way in which symbolic power (scientific type) affects the exercise of their teaching work.

So, one professor mentions :

“...the opportunity for critical thinking and reflection helped significantly in the clarification and crystallization of my views on the issue of the minor importance the university assigns to the practice of teaching, on which I personally had formed an opinion only through the process of my participation in Departmental Assemblies” (17).

Another professor mentions :

“The communication and the discussion together with the researcher allowed me the opportunity and the motivation to think and express opinions on the matter of the lack of importance assigned to the teaching act, on the part of the University...” (13).

Finally, the statement of one of the informants is very characteristic :

“...consequently now thanks to the discussion with the researcher, during the interview, I think we chatted about something very important which could function as an anti-phobic proposal for those who only look at the research work and don't bother themselves with the teaching...” (16).

Consequently, it becomes apparent that the relationship that was established between the researcher and the informants, as well as her position in the scientific field of the University of Patras, and her attitude, were decisive factors which allowed the informants to move to another more critical and reflexive position, even on issues that concern symbolic power in the university field. The narratives of the professors who took part in the research all outline the symbolic power of the university field in the exercise of their teaching practice and function. The centre weight of their narratives is linked to the paradoxical fact of the lack of importance which the university field appears (through the informants' narratives) to attach to the professors' teaching work. This is a phenomenon which the professors - despite the fact that they don't agree with it - silently accept, bowing to the symbolic power of the university field, which enforces it since it puts first the accumulation of scientific capital (Bourdieu, 1999: 238; 2007b: 128).

The researcher being herself new to the scientific field of the University of Patras, as a doctoral candidate, possessed to some extent the necessary scientific capital of the field and at the same time was knowledgeable about the game, with the necessary belief in it and consequently the ability to benefit from it (Bourdieu, 1992: 45; Bourdieu, 1994: 32). Hence she had previously 'constructed' the successive situations of her research field, in order to understand the 'discourses' through the narratives of the social 'wheels' of her informants (Bourdieu, 1992: 138). Moreover the researcher didn't maintain a position of the 'distanced look', aimed at evaluative neutrality, but rather tried to objectify the subjective relationship with the research subjects, mobilising her experiences in order to better support the informants' ability to express themselves (Bourdieu, 2003: 291).

4 Concluding Findings

In this paper an attempt was made to investigate two ‘silent’ parameters which however have the potential to influence the communicative framework of biographical narrative interviews, as issues of major methodological significance. Within the field of the University, where authority and hierarchy constitute decisive factors, it is obvious that they may affect communication. Consequently, from a methodological point of view, the study of the influence of a position and the researcher’s particular attitude, constitutes a decisive factor in research data collection, as well as an interesting question both generally and of itself.

Even the researcher’s entry into the research field, “...*is inexorably linked to the attribution to it of a social identity, in other words with that we can potentially call a research self*” (Tzanakis & Savvakis, 2007: 121). From this perspective, the participants in the research recognise in the researcher certain social properties and orient their action towards him, based on this recognition.

From the research data it emerged that the informants’ narrative process was positively influenced and facilitated by the position of the researcher in the field under investigation.

It also appeared that the fact the researcher was well informed on the stakes of the field, knowledge of the game played out within it, as well as the attitude and relationship she developed with the informants, made her communication with them more productive and facilitated the depiction of elements the collection of which was planned for within the framework of the research (Bourdieu, 1992; 1999; 2005).

Lydaki (op. cit. 128) claims that in fieldwork the link between the researcher and the subjects of his research, like the proximity, and his personal experience with them too, will make him capable of understanding as much the way in which they answer, as the rules which delimit and serve in the place of laws, which for them are inviolable, in their social field.

On the other hand, Tzanakis and Savvakis (2007: 125) estimate that observation by the Other – in our case the researcher by the interviewees – takes place with the knowledge of the Other, through reflection on the research self. In this way it seems that what the subject of the research experience attempts, is his continual negotiation with other subjects in the field, whom he asks to speak to him about their views, the way they act and the way they interpret their action through reflection in the biographical research.

However the collection too of the ‘object’ the researcher aims at, is a result of a ‘dialogically produced consent’, within the transaction of the field, within which the interviewees welcome, accept, cooperate and narrate or reject collaboration with him (Habermas, 1987; Savvakis & Tzanakis, 2007: 132). In order to succeed in constructing the ‘object’ we must establish explicit⁴ assumptions, to construct sociologically the prefabrications of the object and even to recognise that the real is relational and that what chiefly exists, are relationships. In other words, something we do not see, in contrast to individuals or groups (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 2009: 423).

However a project of objectivation, when it is applied, as in the present paper in the field itself, within which the subject of the objectivation is located, allows us to adopt a scientific point of view, absolutely associated with the empirical point of view of the researcher. A reflective position, which permits us to gain knowledge of the restrictions which may be exercised

⁴ The latent meanings may have a confirmatory character but the innovative element, according to the principles of reflexive biographical research, is for the informants’ discourse to appear as clearly as possible.

on the scientific “subject”, through its unbreakable bonds with the empirical “subject”, in other words, with its vested interests, beliefs, pre-admissions and everything it needs to “rupture” in order to “establish” itself. In reality, the conditions of possibility of the scientific subject and those of its object are one. This is nowhere more apparent than when the research acquires as object the scientific field itself, from the perspective of positions held by the subjects within it, in other words the true subject of scientific knowledge (Bourdieu, 2006: 320-321).

In any case, as Bourdieu mentions characteristically : “*Who would think of relying on a journey without having any idea of the place it would end*” (Bourdieu, 1994: 139).

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