Making Identity Talk. On Qualitative Methods in a Longitudinal Study

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Abstract: This article reports on the theoretical questions and methodological means in a 10 year research project titled "Identity development, work careers and social networks". Our project, which has proposed the concept of a *patchwork-identity*, has realized a longitudinal study with qualitative methods. The article discusses the methodological choices and their benefits and costs.

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1. The Project

In 1998 at the universities of Munich and Leipzig we[1] finished a research project on identity development, which had started 10 years before, in 1989. The empirical core was a 5 year longitudinal study with three waves of interviews. Our project was headed by Heiner KEUPP and titled "Identity development, work careers and social networks of young adults". It was part of a larger research program on the "Developmental perspectives of work" (cf. KEUPP & HÖFER 1997; KEUPP et al. 1999).[2] [1]

2. Why Qualitative Methods?

There were quite a few arguments for deciding on the use of qualitative methods[3]. Some came from other identity researchers, who had criticized the methodological strategies,which had been used up to then in identity research. BOURNE for instance (1978 a; b) in a very comprehensive overview on empirical work in identity research found a lack of process-focused studies for the benefit of structure-focused ones. HAUßER (1983, p.177) complained on the predominance of readymade, narrowly focused research instruments, which regularly fail to take into account the subjective importance of self experience, so important for identity development. The general research on adolescence added the idea of an "affinity between qualitative research and the research field of adolescence" (FUCHS 1988). [2]

Other arguments on behalf of qualitative research came from our own research questions. In our discussion of a patchwork identity we had taken as a starting point the critique of ERIKSON's identity model (ERIKSON 1966)[4] and asked, whether today the openness of the identity projects, the coexistence of various dynamics in various life worlds might be the actual characteristics of identity development. With this we focused on the historical subtext of ERIKSON's theory (cf. TAP 1980) and confronted it with actual analyses of subject construction, talking about

- the process of individualization and of "disembedding" (GIDDENS 1990),
- the destandardization of adolescence,
- the growth of self-reflexive identity concepts[5],

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2 We interviewed 152 men and women aged 18 to 22. Two subpanels were distinguished: #1 with persons, who had a discontinual work career and who were in social projects aiming at an integration in the work sphere at the moment of the first interview. #2 were young apprentices in city administrations. The interviewees came from four different regions, two urban areas (Munich and Leipzig) and two rural ones (Coburg and Muehldorf).

3 This presentation of our then positions follows largely KRAUS & STRAUS 1991. All other arguments are mine. Some of my colleagues may have different views.

4 More precisely in KEUPP et al. 1999; a critique in STRAUB 1991 and MEY 1999.

5 For the larger context of these arguments cf. WAGNER 1994; BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM 1994.

- the qualitative change in the meaning of work for the identity development of young adults. [3]

Such theses on the social change of subject construction were at that time hardly accepted in identity research. We were thus embarking on a research territory, where little work had yet been done, theoretically as well as empirically,and where the results had come out of a different theoretical and methodological orientation. In an exploratory situation like this a qualitative design seemed the first hand choice for us—and the committee which had to decide on our proposal. [4]

3. Patchwork-identity as a Methodological Question

This general methodological decision had to be operationalized according to our specific research questions, which have been roughly outlined above. Generally speaking we wanted to take seriously the individualization thesis with regards to identity development. When social embeddedness is no longer safeguarding identity in the same way as before, then, so the thesis, this task has to be accomplished by the individual himself/herself in his/her various lifeworlds. When such identity markers are no longer offered by society, the subject himself/herself has to become the creator of "himself/herself" in a much larger sense than before. This leads to highly individualized biographies, making it very difficult to get synchronized with other biographies (i.e. to develop and to maintain partnerships). And finally,the question is where this leaves us with regards to an individual sense of coherence. How can coherence be experienced by an individual,that is facing unrelated patches of self-experience in highly incongruous situations? [5]

3.1 Focusing on"identity as self-construction in various lifeworlds"

As HAUßER (1983, p.177) has pointed out, a methodology oriented on the various lifeworlds will lead to results, which are more differentiated and "thicker" than the ones coming from instruments, which are abstracting from everyday life. Apart from this thesis, our focus on lifeworlds was also a consequence of individualization theory. According to that the various lifeworlds of an individual become more important for his/her identity development as other institutions of society (e.g. churches, social classes) are loosing their influence. To differentiate between lifeworlds, we were able to build on methodological instruments and experiences out of the ERIKSONian tradition, e.g. the ones developed by J. E. MARCIA(1966; 1993), which differentiated between the lifeworlds of work, family and peers. We insisted, however,that the subjects should be free to bring in other lifeworlds as well. This was an important point, as "... an adolescent today is usually involved in a great number of everyday lives" (ZIEHE 1991, p.64). [6]

On the one hand we wanted to cover the lifeworlds as stages for the construction of partial identities, on the other hand we wanted to seize their function and quality as social resources (cf. AHBE 1997; MITZSCHERLICH 1997). For it is obvious,that the social individualization is creating chances and risks, but distributes them unequally. The documentation of lifeworlds and resources was to

be completed by a visualization of the subject's social network. Social network research has developed a vast array of instruments for this task (cf. KEUPP 1990). They cover and visualize social relationships and, furthermore, help to have them available for the interviewer's orientation during the interview. [7]

3.2 Focusing on "identity as an ongoing process"

If one starts with the thesis of identity development not as aiming at a result, which can be inspected, but as construction work, which never can be terminated, then it is reasonable to have the process characteristics made visible. Longitudinal studies are, as the more quantitatively oriented research has it, indispensable for the following research aims: (1) to save information about development, (2) to collect information about change and change patterns, (3) to relate earlier behavior with later behavior (4) to relate earlier conditions with later behavior (WOHLWILL 1973, p.140). These, indeed, were aims of our project. Yet, we wanted more than that: We did not want to just fix a certain identity status at a certain measure point, but on the contrary, to draw the lines of the identity process in cooperation with the interviewee, cover the development of identity projects, accompany their realization and their retrospective evaluation/narration. This was not to be achieved by "measurements" carried out at certain times, but by a prospective, retrospective and situative self-construction, which was to take place interactively during the interview. [8]

Process orientation was realized by a longitudinal design with three waves of interviews. This lead to the next question on when these interviews should take place. We decided for an *orientation along life events and situations of change*. We expected the process of development and restructuring of identity to be more easily visible at moments, when the individual was involved in an acute process of change. Crises in the sense of an inner process can rarely be foreseen, yet concerning such processes induced by outside events we thought we might have a chance. With regards to work, the second focus of our research project, the research on adolescence has brought together an abundance of confirmation that the start of a professional career indeed is a situation of great change. It means deciding on a profession, finding an apprenticeship, getting started, going in for an examination at the end and finally finding a long-term employment. Accordingly, we interviewed the young adults for the first time when they started their apprenticeship, and the second time when they finished it. The third interview had no foreseeable external impulse of change. It was to be supposed, however, that after having finished their apprenticeship and having found a permanent job other professional and private identity projects would become more prominent (leaving the family and living on their own, starting an intimate relationship). Furthermore it was to be expected that some of our 152 interviewees would fail their exams, which would enforce new processes of reorientation. [9]

3.3 Focusing on "the active subject" in identity construction

This focus may seem trivial nowadays. It is not, as HARRÉ has pointed out in a short presentation of the changing paradigms in psychology during the last fifty years. Contrary to the idea of an individual, who experiences a development "inside", we aimed at giving our interviewees the space to show themselves as competent designers of their own lives. From our analysis on individualization and a self-reflexive biography[6] follows the idea of an active individual in the sense of a "self-socialization" (HEINZ & WITZEL 1995). HURRELMANN equally talks of an *actively reality processing subject* (1983). Youth, not as a time which is to be lived through passively, where society—or biology—takes over the active role, but as a process, which is and can be influenced by an active subject. This understanding of our interviewees as active reality processors were to be transported by

- A certain *interactive attitude:* the interviewee is talked to as someone, who actively designs his or her life, not only reacting, but acting, not only taking up suggestions, but giving some.
- *Meta-communication and feedback:* The interviewees were to be actively encouraged, to comment and correct the impressions of the interviewers.
- *Variable methodological tools*, which can be adjusted to the specific needs of the interviewees (e.g. the social network chart). [10]

3.4 Focusing on identity as work on biographic coherence

The individualization thesis insists on the eminent task of self construction which individuals today have to realize. In the face of their dissonant self-experiences the question is, whether there is still a meaning left for the concept of coherence. Before elucidating this theoretical question it was important for our empirical research, to have the postulated disparity of self-experiences and the difficulty of self construction to show up at all. This appeared to be a difficult task. We wanted to do research on identity by interviewing, i.e. by the way of language/talk, but talking about oneself is not necessarily suitable for talking about inner *in*coherence. Leaving away the question of openness and social conformity, the interviews of a pre-study showed, that the interviewees often lacked the words to express their inner states. Furthermore, self-narratives seemed to be inherently coherent; there typically seemed to be a *forced coherence* in this type of narratives. This, however, blocked the expression of that what was so precious to us, the display of ruptures of identity, which could not be easily mended. Methodologically speaking we were facing a threefold dilemma of coherence:

- The interaction in the interview forces the interactive partners to demonstrate the competence for a plausible self-demonstration, adequate to the situation. Coherence is a central part of it.
- Coherence as normative expectation is woven into many methodological elements and its acceptance by the communication partners is thus called for.

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6   cf. STRAUS 1991

- Finally, the interviewers are not free from subscribing to the old identity model in their interviewing, even if they may have a critical position in their theoretical work. Their own subjective urge for coherence, their desire for a plausible individual story with a beginning and an end, assures in communication the validity of a paradigm, which is theoretically put into question. [11]

There are, thus, many reasons why it is not that simple to bring personal ambivalence or ruptures in identity construction out in the open. This, however, was exactly what we were looking for. Was it possible to subvert this ongoing construction of coherence during the interview? How would we get a chance to document inner minority positions, i.e. self-evaluations, which the individual is taking tentatively under very specific conditions, yet whose integration into the script reservoir for the means of self presentation currently is not acute. The interviewees were to have the possibility, even our encouragement, to show their ambivalence. Several strategies made sense to us—especially in their combination.

- *Climate of communication*. Working on a trustful climate, empathy in the sense of ROGERS' basic rules for therapeutic situations. This was supposed to make possible various self presentations. These basic rules—stemming from psychotherapy—facilitate the display of images of the self, which are already there—even if only partially or undercover.
- *Meta-communcation*: The question of ambivalence can up to a certain degree be explicitly addressed and thus normalized during the interview (cf. KIHLSTROM & CANTOR 1984).
- *Interview strategy*. Basically the idea is, to bring the interviewee in various positions from which to talk about himself/herself and to elaborate his/her self-presentations. The question of deciding on a job for instance, can be talked about from the perspective of a general topic for young adults, form the perspective of a child within family opinion and tradition, a peer group with a set of rules, or a regional adherence. The involvement in various social roles at the same time is thus transformed into a sequence of topics and can thus be discussed one after the other.
- *Methodological instruments*. Communication partners are using many protective strategies. Having the interviewee react spontaneously may result in an openness which will change his or her attitude in the situation. Furthermore spontaneity may lead to a subjective truth which even the interviewee is not aware of . Methods like this are aiming to subvert the urge for order by spontaneity. Here we decided for having the interviewee choose among two sets of photos. [12]

4. Our Methodological Toolbox

4.1 The frame: A partially structured interview

As a frame we decided on a qualitative interview in the sense of a *problem centered partially structured interview* (KRÜGER-MÜLLER 1990), following CLAES, who argued, that "... the systematic interview, centered on topics which have a central meaning for the development of the adolescent personality, obviously is the method of choice" (1986, p.186). The interviewers are not in a receptive, passive role. Instead they try "... by confronting the narrated with information from other spheres or with contradictions during their interview, by focused inquiries ... through the interviewer to find out as precisely as possible that which the interviewee means". This has to be done without any evaluation from the part of the interviewer "accepting fully the interviewee as the only expert of his situation" (KRÜGER-MÜLLER 1999, p.18). After WITZEL's exhaustive discussion of this form of interview it seems superfluous to go any further into its explanation (WITZEL 2000). [13]

The main interview topics are—in line with the title of our project—work and social network. Therefore the division of our interview guide is work, family and peers/leisure. It was certainly allowed to widen the scope for other lifeworlds which seemed relevant in the individual case. A fourth part was self-evaluation, a subject, which abstracted from the separate lifeworlds. Here we discussed topics which did not belong clearly to one single lifeworld (e.g. health, body). This helped also—in the sense of the change of perspective—to put into context the various lifeworld centered positions. [14]

4.2 Additional elements of the interview

While the interview guide outlines structure and topics of the interview, other elements were introduced during its conduct. [15]

4.2.1 Social network chart

The research on social network has become a large field, discussing various aspects of social relationship and proposing a whole bundle of different procedures. We have decided on the use of an I-centered network chart, which visualizes the size and the subjective relevance of a social network. The chart is introduced to the interviewee at the beginning of the interview and then filled in according to the topic discussed at a certain moment. It is a sheet of paper, on which 7 concentric circles are marked. The center point is the I. The interviewee is asked to mark the relevant persons on this chart. Important dimensions of the evaluation are:

a. *The structural dimension*: density: are the persons in contact with each other; multiplexity: how many persons appear in more than one lifeworld; distance; conflictuality of relationships.

b. *The functional dimension*: help-seeking behavior: relevance and use of one's network as a coping resource; individual effort to actively design or redesign one's network. [16]

4.2.2 Sociodemographic questionnaire

The sociodemographic questionnaire is introduced and filled in at the beginning of the interview. It asks for the personal and biographic situation and facilitates comparisons with other interviewees or other panels. Apart from that it represents a first ordering of personal data to facilitate the conduct of the interview. [17]

4.2.3 Life-event-questionnaire

The life-event questionnaire is designed with the various lifeworlds in mind. It focuses on the last 12 months and asks, whether an event ("I was sick") or an evaluation ("I felt happy") is true or not. It is filled in by the interviewee. The interviewer checks the answers for the need of additional clarifications. This instrument is safeguarding for the completeness of life-event data. Thus topics which do not fit that easily into a single lifeworld (e.g. health) are integrated. The questionnaire was also quite often useful for bringing difficult subjects out into the open (e.g. "I had problems with the police"). Finally, this instrument allows for comparisons with results from other life-event-studies. [18]

4.2.4 Photos

Our discussion of non-cognitive methods mentioned above lead to the integration of two sets of photos into the (first) interview. The use of photos has a certain—not very important—tradition in social science (cf. BECKER 1981; KRAUS & FRYREAR 1983) and self-concept research (ZILLER 1991). In our case it was a matter of one set of photos of young women and another one of young men. This helped to start the discussion on self-image and the imagined partner. The question of how to interpret the answers in the face of such a complex stimulus pattern was of minor importance for us, because our interviewees were asked to explain their choices and by that produced a text to rely on. [19]

4.2.5 Self-narratives as "story line"

The *story line* (GERGEN & GERGEN 1998) is an instrument, which we used only once, during the last interview. It was supposed to elicit in a final step the *mythopoetic construction* (McADAMS 1985) and to save it as a narrative. The interviewee draws a line (often like a temperature-chart), which is supposed to represent the years between the three interviews and gives an explanation for his or her drawing. The integration of this instrument in our repertoire shows an altered position with regard to coherent self-narratives. Now the focus was not "behind" the self-narratives, but "on" them. In a way, the story line was also meant to symbolically bring to an end the contact between the interviewee and the interviewer. A road had been walked together, its course was now inspected retrospectively. [20]

4.3 Questions and methods—a synopsis

The central topics of the interview: Work, family, peers, leisure, self, were translated in focuses of questioning. These focuses were treated with various methods. The synopsis shows, which focus was supposed to be addressed by which methods. [21]

Focus of questioning	Methodological tool
Subjective presentation of facts	Interview guide, comparison of interviews from various waves
Feelings	Interview guide, interactive attitude, change of perspective, life event-questionnaire, photo-sets
Moral reasoning (BRUNER 1990), constructions of causality	Interview guide, lifeworld-specific change of perspective
Social resources	Social network-chart, interview guide
Realization of options	Social network-chart, interview guide
Self-assessment of development	Joint comparison of material, e.g. network charts
Sense making (BRUNER 1990), mythopoetical constructions	Story line

Table 1: Focus of questioning and methodological tools [22]

5. Experiences

5.1 Lifeworld-dependent change of positions

Our look on the lifeworlds proved to be positive in many ways. Firstly, we could confirm the heterogeneity of identity development in the various lifeworlds, as MARCIA had already shown. Secondly, the offer of three lifeworlds as focuses rendered possible a first orientation to be individually refined. Add to this, that the lifeworlds were not discussed as *separate* parts but in their *relationship* to each other. Work for instance was discussed as a separate lifeworld, but also from the point of view of family and of peers. This change of perspective resulted in a considerable additional differentiation of the self-narratives. Finally, a lifeworld-oriented strategy bans the danger of immunizing one single context prematurely against other lifeworld-specific positions. Here we found parallels to the *positioning theory* of HARRÉ & VAN LANGENHOVE (1999). [23]

Next to the interview strategy the network chart played an important part. For one thing, it did its job, documenting the social relations in the various lifeworlds and their quality as social resources. It was also an important means for displaying visually this information during the interview. Even with only ten names to

remember, it gets difficult for the interviewer to keep in mind who is who in the narrative. With the visualization in the network chart on the table this task is much easier. [24]

Finally, the network chart, which was created anew in each interview, was useful to account for changes of the network and to elicit corresponding explanations. Form the point of view of identity theory we found those cases very interesting, in which persons, who had been prominent in the first interview, were not remembered in later ones. Here some detailed insights in the individual attempts for self-construction and -reconstruction were possible. [25]

The question whether the interviewer and the three interviews, which lasted often two and more hours, became a lifeworld on their own for the interviewees, was not systematically explored. There are, however, many indicators, that this indeed was the case at least for some. These persons used the interview as a space for self-reflection and for tentatively trying out different positions. [26]

5.2 The unfinished side of longitudinal studies

Paradoxically, longitudinal studies are often felt to be too short. For one thing, the personal involvement in other peoples' life gives a feeling of goodbye at the end. Furthermore, a panel of 152 lives cannot be synchronized with a research plan. In some cases important biographic decisions were in the wings at the third interview, which made us regret that they would not be integrated in our results. Here again it became obvious that the prolongation of adolescence reaches far into the late twenties, a period which was not accounted for in our design. [27]

Apart from this general lamento, the scheduling of the three waves proved to be reasonable. The start of a work career is indeed a time of great changes and the end of apprenticeship necessitates a personal project for the next future. Intimate relationships on the other hand were only partially well developed. While some had already started very intensive projects, others had only very basic experiences in this lifeworld with the result of having hardly any detailed projects for the next future. The same finding applies to the detachment from the parents. As a result it can be maintained, that the trajectories are highly individual and that they do not simply lead to *identity achievement* in the sense of MARCIA. Instead, many examples show that an achieved identity in one interview may become the source of *identity diffusion* in the next one. [28]

5.3 The "active subject" has not always a suitable self-image

Hardly any focus seemed so obvious to us and hardly any led so quickly to irritations. For quite a few adolescents refused to take over and display the role of an "active subject". Some called themselves a "stino", a "stinkingly normal" person, about whom there is not much to say. Our team took over this term for this kind of self-narratives. Life as a succession of chances, without an identifiable actor and even less so with themselves in that role. Our first analysis focused on differences between East and West Germany. East German

adolescents—thus went the West German argument—have difficulties in narrating themselves as active subjects because of a socialization, which emphasized the collectivity. They are more familiar with a narrative which proposes the contingency of developments and which display their integration in group context without having an individualized position (WALDMANN & STRAUS 1992). [29]

A second look, however, led to a refinement of our argument. The main criterion for presenting oneself as an active subject seems to be the availability of social resources. In this sense, the difference between East and West German adolescents mirrors the loss of social resources for the East Germans in the years after the fall of the Wall. Thus our findings intensified our discussion on East-West-differences and emphasized the focus on social resources. This view was already empirically integrated—via the network chart and the look on the various lifeworlds. Now it gained considerably in theoretical importance. [30]

5.4 Disembedding and narrative coherence: There is more to the picture ...

The question of coherence as a concept in identity theory was with us for the whole life of the project. We worked on it from various angles. This lead to the introduction of the concept of a *narrative coherence* (KRAUS 1996) and of a *sense of coherence* (HÖFER 2000). On the methodological level our development lead to another strategy for dealing with the pressure for coherence in narrative constructions. While we aimed at the beginning to subvert the mythopoetical constructing, to avoid their being constructed (cf. 3.4.), our understanding of the process of narrating became more differentiated and with it our research strategy as well. This development was helped by the dialogical and narrative turn in social science (cf. SARBIN 1986; 1997; SAMPSON 1993; ANDERSON 1997; STRAUB 1998). The narrative construction of coherence then was no longer something to be undermined. On the contrary, now we let this strategy do its work as well as possible and then analyze the material gained. Language was no longer seen as adversary, that blocks the search for something behind, but as the *space in which meaning making takes place*, and as such the central focus of our research. And the individual narrative strategies to fill this space were then to be analyzed. [31]

If the idea of judo is not to block the force of the "adversary", but to use it for one's own purposes, then this is the direction into which we developed our understanding. This was possible, because the interviews have always been designed to be narrative and argumentative ones. Now we aimed no longer at weakening the mythopoetic construction work, but to support its powerful presentation and to get the most out of it. Experiences of disruption are then not to be looked for beyond the text, but in the text itself. There these disruptions appear

- in time perspective,
- in the handling of agency in one's self narrative,

- in the clearness of one's projects

- and in the handling of causality in self-narratives (cf. KRAUS 1996, pp.229ff.).[7] [32]

Making identities talk. This was not supposed to be understood as a "lemon-squeezer" approach, but as "meaning making", as Jerome BRUNER (1990) has named it. Our empirical work made clear to us, even more so than the theoretical discussions, what the interviews were all about: the communal, interactive work on meaning making, more precisely on our interviewees' self-narratives as a dialogical enterprise. [33]

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7   The slowly developing narrative analysis has a whole variety of analytical ways to offer, although there is still a lot of work to do: CZARNIAWSKA 1998; CORTAZZI 1993; DEMAZIÈRE & DUBAR 1997; TUVAL-MASHIACH & ZILBER 1998; RIESSMAN 1993.

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