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Doing Biographical Research —Ethical Concerns in Changing Social Contexts

Abstract: Rapid changes in different spheres of social life (especially the commercialization of science, the digitalization of data, and the explosion of social media) have recently influenced definitions of research situations and approaches to findings in the social sciences. While various new standards from the natural sciences have been implemented, research situations have also been shaped by circumstances related to wider cultural changes, that is, by a sort of a cultural shift, especially in the sphere of new media communication. All these phenomena have revived the discussion of ethical issues. This article analyzes the current methodological status of biographical research as part of a professional ethic construed as the systematic exploration of the methodology used by biographical researchers and the need for constant reflection on the research process. The article is devoted to different areas that may be associated with ethical concerns: the relationship between a researcher and an interviewee; problems related to the consequences of digital archiving; the proper style of doing research when there are strong expectations that the results will be disseminated; the possible consequences of using informed consent with the illusory expectation that it removes ethical dilemmas; and the practices leading to a professionalization of ethics.

Keywords: Ethical dilemmas, biographical research, qualitative studies, informed consent

Introduction

In the social sciences, the research process and procedures may produce ethical concerns. By "process" I mean the specific situations a researcher may encounter while collecting empirical material, and by "procedures" I refer to the regulations, ethical codes, and principles which have been established by various bodies and which a researcher is expected to respect. These codes have recently been changing very rapidly. Over the last few decades the discussion on ethics in qualitative research has expanded and become more intense for at least two reasons: first, we can interpret this trend as an element of wider phenomena characteristic of (post)modern society, such as auto-reflection, increased reflection about professional practices, processes of democratization, and increasing sensitivity—all these have created an atmosphere conducive to deep reflection on ethical issues; and second, since the last decades of the twentieth century, many procedures developed in the natural sciences have been imported to the social sciences, quite often directly without taking into account the specific differences in the two modes of research.

In Poland, the discussion of ethical concerns produced by these two circumstances seems less animated than, for instance, discussion in the Anglo-Saxon world. In my pa-

per I will reflect on this problem in reference to a specific field of qualitative research: the biographical method. I have chosen this field for two reasons: first, it is a field with which I am well acquainted, as I have engaged in biographical research and have reflected on the research process; and second, the biographical approach, which is based on personal documents and recently mainly on interviewing[1] is particularly subject to various ethical concerns. In other words, the biographical approach provides the most vivid ethical dilemmas in qualitative research and can thus help to sharpen our understanding of their meaning and importance. Yet there is one more reason to consider biographical research. This year we will celebrate the centenary of the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918–1920), a classic study from the Chicago School of Sociology and regarded as the beginning of the biographical approach in sociology. Moreover, according to Zygmunt Dulczewski (1982: 77), Znaniecki's student and a commentator on his work, "The autobiographical method proper was formulated by Znaniecki alone and took place after his return to Poland in 1920." The idea of using personal documents was related to Zaniecki's concept of the "humanistic coefficient"—a sociologist should focus on the meaning assigned by individuals to their experience of things and situations. Human behavior and attitudes can be comprehended and understood only if we have access to people's interpretations and individual perspectives. The application of the humanistic coefficient became a pivotal methodological directive for exploratory reflections in the social sciences in general, and in sociology in particular.[2] We should bear in mind that for a few decades of the twentieth century, when neo-positivist and scientific approaches had come to dominate international sociology, the biographical approach was still being cultivated in Poland, due mainly to Znaniecki, who was an influential teacher of a generation of outstanding sociologists, such as Józef Chałasiński and Jan Szczepański, who continued and developed his work. In many Western handbooks, Znaniecki's approach was characterized as "the Polish method" (Dulczewski 1982: 83). For example, when René König prepared his book on methodology in 1962, it was Szczepański who wrote the chapter on the biographical method (Szczepański 1962). At the same time, Polish sociologists' contributions to biographical research based on collected memoirs have not become well known due to the language barrier, as all their books were published in Polish (Bertaux 1981: 6).

I have introduced this digression in order to emphasize the importance of the biographical approach for qualitative social research, which grew out of it. The significance of biographical research increased in the last decades of the twentieth century, when it started to develop rapidly. This was when the ethical problems of biographical interviewing came to the fore. The discussion then was focused on the very relationship between a narrator and an interviewer, on promises of anonymity, methodological responsibility, and mutual trust. Recently, the fast pace of change in different spheres of social life (especially the

[1] We should remember that biographical research was originally built on the analysis of written materials: biographies, letters, memoirs, and diaries.

[2] Znaniecki used diverse biographical materials: private letters, written life histories, and written biographical stories on various topics. The last two were usually produced by various competitions organized by institutions, including academic ones. The authors of the best texts were rewarded and the texts were published. This was called "inspired memoir writing" and it became a sort of a social action, because collecting memoirs "soon became not only an object of academic research but also a factor of public life" (Szczepański 1982: 7).

commercialization of science, the digitalization of data, and the explosion of social media) have influenced definitions of the research situation and approaches to results in the social sciences. Certain new standards have been implemented from the natural sciences, and the research situation has been shaped by circumstances related to wider cultural changes, which can be recognized as a sort of a cultural shift, particularly in the sphere of the new media communication. All these phenomena have revived the discussion of ethical issues.

This paper consists of sections devoted to different aspects of ethical concerns. I start by reviewing issues that are "classic" yet still relevant and that involve the relationship between a researcher and an interviewee. Then I move on to such issues as the consequences of digital archiving, the proper manner of doing research when there are strong expectations of disseminating the results, and the possible consequences of implementing informed consent with the illusory expectation that it removes ethical concerns. In addition, I discuss practices leading to the professionalization of ethics, and last but not least, changes in social definitions of public versus private spheres. I think the centenary of the publication of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* justifies such reflection.

The State of Biographical Research—the Professional Ethic

My remarks in this section refer to the state of biographical research in general, yet empirically my comments are based mainly on an analysis of Polish studies. The analytical tools that have been developed can be considered the real epistemological achievement of the biographical approach. Analytical tools based on sociolinguistic knowledge, and theoretical assumptions rooted in interpretative sociology enable scholars to make subtle analyses of biographical constraints influenced by social barriers. In contrast to quite typical social explanations pointing to schematic circumstances (i.e., social class, pathology, or poverty) as a source of various social behaviors, a biographical analysis based on circumstantial reconstruction of a sequence of biographical experiences shows how and in what way the behaviors might have been produced (Czyżewski 2013: 2).[3] While we are often confronted with the conviction that special skills are not needed to do biographical research and analyze empirical data, it is not easy to estimate the accuracy and reliability of data, especially when it may be blurred, subjective, and unrepresentative. Yet the supposition of easiness has various negative consequences. Biographical research is also often depreciated by its users due to the belief that a biographical analysis does not require any specific skills, (e.g., knowledge of statistics and/or sophisticated computer programs) which means that no particular education is necessary. This belief is often supported by a mistaken idea of

[3] These comments refer mainly to the type biographical analysis that relies on concepts rooted in the traditions of interpretative sociology, such as those of the Chicago School, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, and sociolinguistic and grounded theory. The most prominent application and elaboration of this subject can be found in Fritz Schütze's work. According to Schütze, single case documents "are not only rigorously sequentially analysed with regard to their contents but also concerning their procedures of reference and accounting. What is first hidden in recorded and transcribed materials becomes empirically and systematically analyzable. With reference to qualitative research in the Chicago tradition, Schütze developed new key concepts and his work in the field of biographical research shows how sociological understanding and knowledge rely both on elaboration of theoretical concepts and adequacy of data collection and analysis" (Apitzsch, Inowlocki 2000: 53).

interdisciplinarity, defined as a postmodern manner of merging all possible frames and sources.[4] Such a misinterpreted idea of interdisciplinarity can be described as a conflation of methods and techniques in sociology. One very good example is the conviction that researchers can, or even should, apply new technologies to qualitative research. Computer-based qualitative data analysis software (Q-DAS) has revolutionized qualitative research in this respect. The belief that Q-DAS needs to be utilized has also entered the field of biographical analysis. The main argument, especially among young adepts of biographical research (mainly PhD students) who are well acquainted with the new technologies, is that it makes work easier. The conviction is not accompanied by the deeper reflection that computer analysis of narratives is not just the application of a handy tool but also frames methodological reasoning. Thus "technology requires researchers to reframe ideas about what can be done and how it is done. It also may have predetermined what is drawn to the researcher's attention (…) Therefore, researchers should understand and reflect on the issues and methodological implications of using computers to assist in qualitative data analysis" (John, Johnson 2000: 393). Each method entails a different way of conducting an analysis or doing biographical research in particular. Whether it is better or worse will depend on the researcher's purpose and approach—but above all, it will be different. Unfortunately, this aspect of methodological reasoning is very rarely considered.

A further consequence of the use of computer analysis involves research practices being shaped by the contemporary need to work within project timeframes and effectiveness being measured by the number of projects and publications. The biographical approach runs counter to this style of work, though, as it requires patience, time, and systematic reasoning, where the difference between the "gross" (work measured in time invested) and the "net" (quick results) is either discouraging or tempts the scholar to proceed quickly without material grounds for interpretation. This way of thinking can be the source of an attitude described by Ursula Apitzsch and Lena Inowlocki (2000: 53): "while biographical research has become of interest to a number of sociologists, a certain impatience with the methodological aspects of biographical analysis, as well as the seemingly weak theoretical benefits from such efforts, have led to some critical judgments." It is not far from such attitudes to the belief that the need for the biographical method is not proven in regard to the questions investigated, and we approach the paradox where, at the end of the day, researchers who use the "interpretative" approach are not convinced that biographical research really has theoretical potential. As a result, empirical data rather serves as an attractive illustration of the issue studied and not as a source for building a theory or for critical reflection on social phenomena and processes.

This situation is also shaped by a lack of shared knowledge, which could lead to misunderstandings, or even worse, could trivialize the discourse among users of the biographical method. The concept of a trajectory of suffering can serve as an example here. The theory of biographical and collective trajectories of suffering, developed by Fritz Schütze and Gerhard Riemann (Riemann, Schütze 1991; Schütze 1992, 2009, 2014) and originating from Anselm Strauss' work on interactions between institutional processes and terminally ill patients, is one of the best developed, new theoretical key concepts based on biographi-

[4] I have written more on this topic in another article (Kaźmierska 2014).

cal analysis. It should be considered one of the significant theoretical achievements in the field of biographical research. However, it is little known to researchers and thus hardly understood (Kaźmierska 2014). A paper published in Polish, whose English title could be translated as "Called to be a Priest—A Biographical Structure that Evades Fritz Schütze's Concept" (Bożewicz 2016) illustrates the point. The author presents the life story of a man who talks about the process of becoming a priest. Her main conclusion refers to the deficiencies of Schütze's method. According to her, the biography she presents cannot be analyzed by means of analytical and theoretical concepts such as "process structures." In my opinion, two criticisms can be levelled at the author. First, although her analysis is very general, it allows the reader to realize that it is not well done, or at least that Schütze's methodology has been wrongly applied. Still, her critical approach can be treated as fitting within the process of exchanging analytical perspectives[5] between researchers and showing various aspects of interpretation. In other words, the methodology of the German sociologist is not the only legitimate way of doing biographical research and a study can be based on other approaches. My second criticism is much more serious. When discussing and criticizing Schütze's concepts, the author does not refer to *any* of his texts. Her knowledge is based on second-hand discussion. Yet Schütze's texts are available not only in German but also in English and quite a few core texts have been translated into Polish. This is an example where an approach is presented as innovative yet is based on a poor theoretical background. The case can be considered one of intuitive, commonsense, self-engendered explanations, which might be defined as "homemade" sociology, or as traditional sociology applying a normative paradigm, even though alluding to the repertoire of notions associated with the biographical approach.[6]

If we take into account such examples of bad practices, it is not astonishing that biographical studies have to face critical voices pointing out that this approach, rooted in interpretative sociology, has lost its analytical and epistemological power due to the inflation of biographical research. It is true to some extent that the presupposition of easiness often leads to a situation where biographical research is trivialized and instrumentalized as a fashionable, attractive approach lacking proper theoretical backing. The above-mentioned case is not an exception—it illustrates quite common practices. Thus the critique refers both to methodological problems (lots of contemporary studies are simply of poor methodological quality) as well as epistemological issues. The power of the biographical approach rooted in interpretative sociology, whose aim was criticism of mainstream sociology, is now used by mainstream sociology itself. This is the criticism expressed by Marek Czyżewski (2013) in his paper "Interpretative Sociology and the Biographical Method: The Change of Function, Anti-Essentialist Reservations, and the Problem of Critique," in which he states that the more popular (influential)—that is, the more mainstream—the biographical method is, the more it is in danger of being trivialized and/or instrumentalized. In accepting this crit-

[5] In analyzing biographical material, a workshop enables researchers to improve their analyses through interaction with a social group of fellow researchers (Riemann, Schütze 1987: 3). The interactive framework of the workshop provides opportunities for comparisons, which make it possible for a researcher to understand the obvious and partly unconscious mechanisms of interaction (in Harold Garfinkel's (1967) sense of "seen but unnoticed").

[6] At the same time we can give examples of good practices, e.g., Waniek 2016.

icism, I would add that it is directed toward the above kind of methodological thinking, or rather lack of thinking, which actually should not be considered biographical research.

By these remarks I hope to have drawn attention to the paradox of contemporary biographical research. The biographical boom apparently changed the significance of the biographical method, but this elevation, which I would call fashion, has not involved new adepts of biographical research asking themselves the serious question that ought to be asked: what is the real methodological, epistemological, and theoretical power of the biographical approach and why am I using it? Moreover, methodological and epistemological aspects of research strongly influence the biographical researcher's professional ethic, which I understand as an elaborated systematic exploration of the researcher's methodology and the theoretical assumptions behind them. As a result, these basic background conditions also impact the ethical dimension of research practices. In other words, epistemological and theoretical thoughts strengthen ethical sensitivity, understood as systematic reflection on ethical aspects of the research process. I am convinced that the problems described influence the contemporary situation, where the biographical approach has to face new challenges, giving rise to new types of ethical concerns.

Ethical Aspects of the Interview Process

The ethical issues of biographical interviewing have always centered around the relationship between the interviewer (the researcher) and the interviewee (the narrator).[7] Yet such issues acquired a specific significance when the biographical approach was revived and new techniques, such as recorded narratives, were introduced. The narrator started to be regarded not only as a source of knowledge delivering the needed data, but also as an independent interpreter and social constructor of reality in a particular social situation, namely, the interaction with the researcher.[8] I think this aspect of doing biographical research used to be a sort of innovative approach to interviewees, treating them to some extent as co-authors of the research process, in which they constructed and told their life stories in the presence of the researcher. Such framing of the researcher-narrator/narrator-researcher relationship led to concerns about ethical issues even before the onset of the present, ongoing discussion about ethics in qualitative research.[9] At the beginning, the discussion was more intuitive than systematic, yet it was based on the experience of fieldwork, when establishing and defining the relationship between the researcher and narrator (which was always intense, and sometimes intimate or even dependent) appeared to be a crucial issue in the

[7] The term "narrator" is used here in a general sense. I will not analyse the nuances involved in the process of storytelling, when the interviewee is in the three epistemic positions of narrator, story-carrier, and biography incumbent (Schütze 2009: 212).

[8] Off-the-cuff storytelling not only makes an application of the *humanistic co-efficient* possible but also allows for interpretations based on a spontaneous narration developed by the narrator according to specific interaction rules and constraints framing the narrative process. There are three of these: (1) the drive and constraint to condense, (2) the drive and constraint to go into detail; and (3) the drive and constraint to close the textual forms (Schütze 2014: 236).

[9] E.g., "The shift in terminology from research subject to research participant is reflected in academic professional discipline codes of conduct, such as the British Psychological Society (1996) and British Sociological Association (1993)" (Birch, Miller 2002: 91).

research process. In other fields, a bit later "[…] the tension has moved to the relation between meanings and acts, between interpretation and action. When the dichotomy of facts and values is abandoned, aesthetics and ethics come to the foreground" (Kvale 2002: 307).

Considering the ongoing discussion I will analyze the researcher-narrator relationship in regard to the following three stages of the research process: interviewing, data analysis (an interview in the form of recording and transcription), and presentation of the research results. All researchers are familiar with these stages as they appear both in designing the research (and for grant applications) and in conducting the research, from the fieldwork to the final published results.

The Interview Phase

We can enumerate various situations the researcher and narrator may encounter, from very intensive longitudinal meetings, when a researcher is focused on the life-history method and the study is based on one case ("as relationships developed over a period of months, our roles have shifted from sympathetic observer, through sounding board to confessor and emotional prop" [Faraday, Plummer 2005: 264]); to only a few meetings, when some kind of dependant relationship may be built; to a single but intensive interview, lasting a few hours. Each of these research situations is differently framed and requires special interpretation of the researcher–narrator relationship. Due to the lack of space in this article I will concentrate mostly on the last variety, which can be considered the most common practice in contemporary biographical studies. Yet the issues I discuss may also concern the other variants.

Even a single encounter with an interviewee requires the researcher to reflect on the research process. But at the same time the atmosphere of trust and respect may produce the illusion that we are engaging in a symmetric interaction—that is, an egalitarian exchange, involving the sharing of our own experiences—which actually "can lead to a kind of seductive imperialism although it seems to be egalitarian" (Merrill West 2009: 173). Such imperialism is based on the power relationship, connected with the fact that interviewing will always remain an asymmetric, "exploitative" situation, where we intend "to arrive on a given scene, ask for people's co-operation, time, energy and knowledge, do one's 'study' or 'project,' and soon enough, leave, *thank yous* presumably extended" (Coles 1997: 76–77). This type of relationship is dominant. At the same time, the power relationship may also refer to a narrator-researcher relation in which the interviewer has to face a difficult interaction situation, that is, when the narrator treats the encounter as a sort of meeting with a supervisor or a therapeutic situation, while the researcher is neither competent nor prepared to deal with such a situation. I think that, by definition, sociological interviewing should not be a therapeutic situation.[10] Nevertheless, such interviewing may have healing effects, and the researcher should be aware of these; not in order to implement a therapeutic approach to the research procedure but to respect the narrator's need to treat telling

[10] The opposite attitude can be found when researchers considered the therapeutic impact as an element of the research procedure, e.g., some of Gabriele Rosenthal's works can be used as an example here. Her narrative interviews became a form of social and therapeutic intervention, aimed at eliminating communication disturbances, for instance, between the generations in a family environment (see Rosenthal 1998, 2003).

his or her story as a sort of healing process.[11] This issue is very important and difficult to regulate by universally applicable rules, as each situation requires specific reactions and behavior. Obviously the researcher should not neglect consideration of such situations. Another difficulty in the interviewer–narrator relationship occurs when the narrator's story involves prejudices and negative stereotypes and the researcher, as an interactional partner, somehow becomes a co-author of the situation (Kaźmierska 2004: 185). The moral obligation would be to protest such an attitude, but at the same time, the situation is part of the process of "exploiting people primarily in the interests of researchers and their careers" (Merrill, West 2009: 83). Accordingly, what makes each research situation problematic is a very thin, difficult-to-define borderline between meeting the Other (in Martin Buber's sense)[12] and a systematic, power-based interaction. Moreover, a complex interpretation of the interaction can be done *ex post*. Therefore, neither ethical codes nor the researcher's experience can guarantee that certain ethical dilemma will be eliminated. It is always an ongoing process.

Data

Thanks to the fieldwork, the researcher obtains two types of material: a recording and a transcription. The recorded story remains the most original data, having specific features. First, it cannot be anonymized, and second, with the passage of time it changes its social meaning—a contemporary life story will have the additional value of oral history material after a few decades have passed. There are ethical issues connected with these two factors due to the processes of data collection and archiving.

The phenomenon of archiving has become a *signum temporis*. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are characterized by exceptionally rapid changes in every aspect of social life. Such speed has produced a sense that there is a lack of reciprocity in perspectives, especially since subsequent generations have entered completely different worlds. Uncertainty about the future makes people look back on the past. Pierre Nora uses this feeling of uncertainty as the starting point for his explanation of the rapid changes in social memory. He claims that uncertainty as to what kind of knowledge about ourselves could be useful to the next generations has led us to record the memories of contemporary society uncritically. Since history cannot give us convincing visions of the future, "duty memory" comes to life, resulting from emotions concomitant with loss (Nora 1989: 16). He calls this type of memory "archival." His diagnosis, which originally concerned the process of collective memory, has been successfully transmitted to other fields of the social sciences. Now archiving and reanalysis have become key issues enforced by grant applications—lots of funding bodies expect the data to be placed in a data set.[13] Although access to such

[11] Oftentimes, narrators themselves conclude that the very act of storytelling had a therapeutic effect, as they had a chance to reflect on their life.

[12] It happens to two people whose lives and experiences cross. This crossing can take place only during the *meeting* and has no justification outside of it. A true *meeting* is coincidental (unplanned) and unpredictable in its drama, therefore, it requires an authentic focus on the other person (Buber 2008).

[13] One of the well-known sets is The QUALIDATA Resource Centre located in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex. Established in the mid 1990s, it is now called the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS). It provides access to a wide range of qualitative data from the social sciences, and promotes the use of

data sets is often limited, ethical questions are raised as to who should have the right to work on non-anonymized material. The advent of digital archiving and the dissemination of findings—framing contemporary science, including the social sciences and the humanities, by the regime of project grants—has changed the position of the researcher, who is now less independent and relies on sponsors. Currently, a project's success is to a large—if not the largest—degree estimated by the dissemination of its findings and frequently by open access not only to the results but also to the collected data. Natasha Mauthner (2014) argues that researchers are also expected to go beyond academia; a book or scientific paper is quite often considered insufficient—scholars are expected to use the new media. The key phrase "under the umbrella of the digital humanities"[14] illustrates this approach very well. Additionally, the expectation that the results will be archived has been imported from the natural sciences. Yet archiving qualitative data raises a distinct set of issues in regard to confidentiality, interviewee consent, and the interviewee's and researcher's anonymity. How can anonymity be ensured? How can consensus between the researcher and the narrator be achieved? How are these to be obtained in different disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, or history, when each has a different definition for the relation between the researcher and interviewee, and the status of the narrative as such? These dilemmas cannot be easily solved.

We researchers usually work on transcripts that are anonymized according to the promise we make to storytellers. Their narrations, though based on the personal story, become texts of culture, analytical cases showing typical relations between biographical and social processes and phenomena. The analysis of a single case aims at treating a person's life story as illustrative of general types (particularly in case studies using the biographical approach) (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 8). Anonymization has a dual meaning here: on the one hand, it protects the narrator from being recognized; on the other hand, it symbolically deprives that narrator of authorship when the narrative becomes a *case*. Considering the first aspect we can say that anonymization is much more difficult in the current time of social media and the Internet, which sometimes create unexpected contexts and configurations of information. The second issue discloses another ethical problem: it raises the question of ownership (Mauthner 2014). The narrator, after telling his or her story and devoting considerable time, remains anonymous in the sociologist's publication (Plummer 2005: 297). While the non-anonymized recording belongs "more" to the narrator than to the researcher, "the [transcribed—K.K] story belongs to the researcher, and often becomes wholly cut off from the life of the teller" (Plummer 2005: 291).

Presentation of Research Results

We should also reflect on the cultural status of oral and written stories. These are two different types of cultural texts. It may be difficult for the narrators to see their lives in print,

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secondary analysis in social research. It contains research projects dating back to 1970. Since October 2012 it has been a partner of UK Data Service. In Poland, the Archive of Qualitative Data was established in 2012; it is affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

[14] E.g., this is a commonly used expression in the guidelines of the European Commission for researchers preparing an application for international projects such as Horizon.

not only because of the form their story has taken, but also because of the way it has been interpreted, which commences with the researcher's presentation. Ruthellen Josselson accurately expressed this dilemma: "I worry about the intrusiveness of the experience being "written down," fixed in print, formulated, summed up, encapsulated in language, reduced in some way to what words contain" (Josselson 2005: 333). Josselson's quandaries in both cases—the presentation of a "raw" transcription and its analysis, are rooted in "conflicting interests between subjects themselves and the interests of subjects as research goals" (Faraday, Plummer 2005: 264).

At least three aspects of the presentation of research results can be analyzed. First, the transcription itself is a basic way of presenting field data. The interviews are transcribed according to a transcription notation system that encompasses all the elements of direct speech. As we know, by definition such speech is not fluent—on the contrary, it is full of self-corrections and the paralinguistic markers that make speech quite different and less attractive in form than the written language. A narrator may be shocked by confrontation with such a "raw" text of his or her life story. At the same time, the researcher should honestly present the material (the "raw" transcription) to be analyzed. This sometimes painful confrontation with the discrepancy between the imagined linguistic quality of one's life story and its real shape is related to a more general dilemma—that is, the discrepancy between the researcher and the interviewee's knowledge about the process of analysis. Narrators are informed about the project's purpose; they know that the researcher will analyze their story, but they can hardly imagine what may be done with the text. The transcript can be analyzed according to certain linguistic and text-structure assumptions with which narrators are unfamiliar, for instance, procedures for referencing and accounting. In other words, narrators usually think that the researcher is only interested in the *what* aspect (what the narrator tells in the story), whereas in many studies the *how* dimension (how the story is constructed and told) is also equally important. As a result, the findings may not resonate with the participant's expectations and he or she may be concerned by the results. The conflicting interests of the narrators and scholars (their research goals) are often ethically ambivalent, especially when the researcher realizes, during the interview, that the narrator treats the interviewer as a person who will represent his or her interests. Such a situation is particularly likely to arise in connection with environments where people feel they are excluded and their problems are hardly recognized in public discourse. On the one hand, giving a voice to such groups meets the moral postulate of memory decolonization, but on the other hand, other ethical dilemmas are produced. The researcher often has to face being placed in the role of a social activist who starts some kind of social intervention on behalf of his interviewees. People often think that a sociologist is a type of a social worker who is investigating in order to help solve certain problems. This fact puts researchers in a very uncomfortable position—sometimes the expectations of intervention may even create a tension between the researcher's scientific interests, which are presumably free of values, and the moral obligation to help people. What is even more difficult from an ethical point of view is that people usually expect the researcher to take their way of seeing and interpreting social reality at face value and do not expect that the researcher will deconstruct their way of thinking, their use of stereotypes or prejudices. In other words, they do not expect the study to be a critical analysis showing how social reality is constructed in the narratives

and what, in Berger and Luckmann's sense, the consequences of this social construction may be.

All these circumstances lead to the general conclusion that researchers who are involved in the production of knowledge have an ethical responsibility toward those who are used in the process (Doucet, Mauthner 2002: 125), yet it is very difficult to define this responsibility. Researchers have tried to solve the problem by constructing a number of procedures and regulations, including ethical codes. Still, the regulations do not reframe the situation in which interviewees may not realize that the study could have, from their viewpoint, little or even negative value. To the contrary, they usually expect that the research will serve their interests and purposes (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 91). Similarly, such regulations do not change the fact that informing participants about the research process does not necessarily mean that they understand and can interpret its goals.

Nevertheless, this is not solely a case of people's expectations but also a question of how the researcher will present the collected material. What can be done, for example, about biographical stories? Obviously, they should be used for the research project as data, but they may also be used in various ways and in changed contexts. One solution for such concerns is to establish ethical codes controlling all stages of research. Informed consent plays a crucial role here.

Ethical Codes and Informed Consent

What constitutes "informed consent" may vary considerably, ranging from a general statement that informants should know they are involved in research and roughly what it is about to a carefully edited document signed by the informant before the research. We can characterize these as the implicit and explicit models (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 86). If we consider the general meaning of "consent," it can be defined as a basic ethical requirement for any research or intervention that utilizes biographical material. The establishment of informed consent can be understood as a process of negotiation between the narrator and researcher which should lead to mutual trust and respect during the whole research process (Kenyon 1996: 314–315), and in such a case the consent can be oral. This unwritten agreement is based on the assumption that although the participants do not sign any document, ethical issues are not forgotten; on the contrary, ethical considerations are an ongoing part of the research. Currently, this interpretation of the research proceeding, which Plummer (2005: 303) calls situational relativism (I will come back to it later), is more often interpreted as ethically unclear or disordered. Thus research is usually regulated by the requirement that participants sign an informed consent document edited according to professional and academic research guidelines. This may be a long, detailed, and difficult-to-comprehend document, especially when it has been created by lawyers. The aim of informed consent is to protect both the interviewee and the researcher. But at the same time such documents can be considered one more sign of the over-institutionalization of social practices. Informed consent has become a sort of routine practice, especially in Anglo-Saxon science, and in a dual sense: first, it can be understood as an obvious element of good practices during the research process, and second, as a defined, regulated modus

operandi which, if successfully applied, releases the researcher from the need of raising further ethical questions concerning the ongoing research process. Yet—especially in the case of biographical interviewing—an ethical definition of such an encounter lies not in a well-prepared document, but, first of all, in the ability to base the interaction on mutual trust and respect. Although quite often it would be difficult to establish formal counter-indications when an interviewee has agreed to tell his or her story (signed the informed consent document), nevertheless, the principle of mutual trust establishes the moral obligation to use the material in the context in which it was created in the case of the narrative as a unique life story (Perry, Mauthner 2004: 146). In other words, the informed-consent document does not free the researcher from the obligation to be a respectful and circumspect interlocutor and it also does not allow him or her to use the data at will, even if the interviewee has given him or her such rights.

Many authors have called attention to other aspects of informed consent that make it even more problematic than imagined by those who established or enforce the procedure. For example, Miller and Bell notice that real informed consent can occur only at the end of the study. Yet according to the rules it must be obtained at the beginning; thus what participants agree to do is, in fact, solely to participate. Neither the researcher nor the interviewee can project what will happen during the encounter, what will be the dynamic of the interaction, and how the story will emerge and be experienced by both. Furthermore, "the researcher's goals may shift during the research process and data collection and analysis" (Miller, Bell 2002: 54 and 65). Additionally, future uses may also change (Bishop 2014: 172) especially when we take into account the problem, which has recently been widely discussed, of access and re-access (Miller, Bell 2002: 53). Thus, it is plausible that there will be a discrepancy between "to what people are being asked to consent, and to what they believe they are consenting" (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 89). Moreover, the formality of such procedures may alienate some groups and individuals. All these factors lead one to the conclusion that gaining consent is certainly connected with practical issues in regard to respect for the narrator's "copyright" but does not have to be tantamount to the ethical issue of respecting participants' autonomy (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 83).

The Increasing "Professionalization" of Ethics

In recent years each discipline, via a professional body, has established ethical guidelines or ethical codes. This phenomenon has occurred in both the natural and the social sciences and as such should be treated as a positive process of developing ethical standards and the reflectiveness of researchers. What makes things problematic is the fact that not only did the impulse for such guidelines come from the natural sciences but their standards have also been directly implanted in the social sciences. For example, in 1977 Carl B. Klockars (2000: 377–399) analyzed *The Institutional Guide to DHEW Policy on Protection of Human Subjects* from 1971 (of the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare). Guidelines were established for both the natural sciences (biomedical, medical, and pharmacological) and the social sciences. The DHEW's model had five categories: "subjects," "researchers," "risks," "benefits," and "informed consent." Each was constructed

from the perspective of the natural sciences. As an important voice in the discussion that started in the US at this time, Klockars quotes Margaret Mead responding "to a request from the National Institute of Health for a statement of procedures in research on human subjects" (Klockars 2000: 392). She wrote: "Anthropological research does not have subjects. We work with informants in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect" (Mead 1969 after Klockars 2000: 392). The same applies to other types of qualitative studies, including biographical research. The narrator and researcher are never placed in a single-role relationship. The narrator is not only a subject but also an interaction partner, a person from whom the researcher can learn not only about the topic under investigation but also about other, sometimes quite unexpected biographical experiences. Mutual trust and understanding arise and develop during the meeting or series of meetings and are assumed by the informant to exist "quite outside any of the mechanics of informed consent is as important to the subject as any assurance guaranteed by that procedure" (Klockars 2000: 394). This kind of discussion continued during the subsequent decades (Gałęziowski, Urbanek 2018). For instance, the following statement appeared on the website of the Oral History Association in January 2017:

> New federal government protocols that better define the Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects have been announced in an effort to make more effective the promulgated regulations known as the Common Rule. According to the announcement, "this final rule is intended to better protect human subjects involved in research, while facilitating valuable research and reducing burden, delay, and ambiguity for investigators. These revisions are an effort to modernize, simplify, and enhance the current system of oversight."

The most critical component of the new protocols for oral historians explicitly removes oral history and journalism from the regulations. The final rule provides that

> "For purposes of this part, the following activities are deemed not to be research: (1) Scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected." [15] The new protocols will take effect on January 19, 2018.

As we can learn from the entirety of this much longer text, such a successful outcome is the result of the efforts of the Oral History Association since the 1990s. For all these years, the review process has generally not been constructive for oral historians. Negotiations were difficult, "as principles and practices developed within biomedical and behavioral frameworks have been incompatibly applied to a more humanistic form of inquiry like oral history." Sometimes, to meet the expectations of PHS, or rather to avoid contentious situations, oral history witnesses were not treated as human subjects but as surrogates of the past—it was the past to be investigated by oral historians and not human beings as such. The solution that was settled upon seems to be good news for oral historians in the USA, but above all it shows the paradoxes rooted in "professionalizing" ethics (Merrill, West 2009: 177) without reflecting on the different nature of research in the natural and social sciences.

This approach to ethics can be described after Plummer (2005: 302–303) as the attitude of an ethical absolutist who aims at establishing firm principles, often encoded in

[15] See http://www.oralhistory.org/2017/01/19/revised-federal-policy-regarding-irbs-and-the-protection-of-human-subjects-announced-impacts-oral-historians/ (access 4.01.2018).

professional charters (e.g., the British Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association) for the guidance of all social research; the regulations are regarded as absolutely necessary to protect both the researched group and the researcher. Thus, professionals in all fields of science should have their code of ethics. In this perspective, "every piece of research should be 'vetted' for its ethical principles" (Plummer 2005: 302). Each researcher must obtain informed consent, make sure participation is voluntary and people can withdraw, inform the participants about any risks involved in the research, protect confidentiality, ensure the participants' well-being, reputation, and employment are not affected, and ensure that selection of the participants is equitable (Plummer 2005: 302–303).

As we can see, the rigorous application of an ethical absolutist approach may lead to the paradoxes described above when the real purpose of the research is lost and, in the name of respecting their rights, individuals paradoxically lose their agency. Consequently, this attitude may reinforce power differences between the researched and the researcher; ethical codes implemented in the shape of strict informed consent procedures reinforce the power position of the researcher and strip away the illusion of friendship and reciprocity (Fine 2003: 178).

Plummer calls the opposite attitude a situational relativist approach. Here the main argument supports the conviction that the "ethical dilemmas of social scientists are not 'special' but conterminous with the problems of living in everyday life [and] as in contemporary life there cannot be any fixed guidelines." Each decision should be drawn from culture and history and not by following rules. "Any attempt to legislate this morality could simply degenerate into mindlessness, rigidity or—as with many professionals—a monopolistic front that perpetuates privileges and elites (those with higher morality (!) than ordinary mortals)" (Plummer 2005: 303). There are many examples supporting this critical approach. For instance, Hammersley and Traianou (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 89) discuss the case of an Australian researcher of Croatian descent attempting a study among an older generation of migrants. Signing the informed consent document appeared to be problematic, as according to the cultural pattern in Croatia, relationships are usually established on the basis of trust, bolstered by a network of friends. The researcher concludes that "By asking my respondents to sign a consent form I positioned myself as a cultural outsider, someone coming from the 'Australian side"' (Colic-Peisker 2004: 88).

Plummer recaps that both approaches have their weaknesses. The absolutist with the informed consent document introduces a power relation that excludes from research those privileged groups who would not agree to sign, whereas the underprivileged have nothing to lose and always say "yes." I would add that the biggest danger of the ethical absolutist perspective is the paradox of losing the ability to reflect and be responsible, due to the illusion that the ethical code and informed consent regulate all possible situations the researcher may encounter. Contrarily, from the relativist perspective, the total lack of regulation could leave room for an unscrupulous or even immoral researcher—as can quite easily be imagined these days. On the level of theoretical and methodological reasoning (as I attempted to show at the beginning of this paper) an unreflective merging of perspectives can be observed, while on the level of social activities or, more widely, social life, it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish between shades of discreteness, trust, or private

and public spheres, and these are crucial issues for qualitative research and especially for the biographical approach.

Public versus Private

When we ask somebody to tell us about his or her life we are necessarily involved in ambivalences in terms of formality versus informality, private versus public, engagement versus distance, and so forth. As we can see, constructing a number of procedures and regulations, including ethical codes, does not solve these problems. Additionally, they are framed by the social and cultural processes of (post)modern society. Accordingly, I think it is also worth commenting on some phenomena that influence the cultural and social background of presenting one's life story to a researcher. Areas of life that in our culture have been consistently and deliberately developed for centuries as the private sphere have now been opened to public scrutiny. The idea of the private sphere, which came to be central to influential forms of Western liberalism (Shils 1980: 246 after Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 104) and can be treated as a universal feature of culture (each culture creates mechanisms that protect certain areas of individual and collective life—taboos and the concept of the sacred versus profane are among them)[16] has been devalued. Thus what could be regarded as one of culture's specific features and achievements is open to the public now. There are also no taboo themes in biographical works. The changes in social definitions of the public versus private spheres can be regarded as a large cultural shift influenced both by technological developments (recording, printing, photography, the electronic reproduction of texts, and above all, the ease of dissemination by the Internet) and social changes of habits, ways of self-presentation (framed by the concept of individualism and agency), lead to blurring of the boundary between the public and private spheres and to difficulty in defining the limits of privacy protection. This tension can be diagnosed as a distinct feature of Western liberal culture (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 100 and 105).

We should take into account that narration has always been mediation between private and public realms. But what is symptomatic is that

> We live in an age of memoir, fostered by a pervasive culture of confession in the media. Life histories are now getting a lot of attention in many academic disciplines like sociology, history, anthropology, psychology, journalism, literary studies. (…) The revolution in Internet and Web-based communication has generated an unprecedented amount of personal exposure that challenges the very idea of privacy (Eakin 2004: 1).

Although this quotation refers to American society, we can easily extend it to other contemporary societies—the public confessional dominates the mass media and emotional discourse is ubiquitous (Merrill, West 2009: 168). Thus, on the one hand, we have thousands of examples of people exhibiting their (auto)biographies in the social media or generally on the Internet, and, on the other hand, we as researchers should question whether we should follow this trend by asking difficult questions, exploring taboo subjects, and expecting people to share intimate life experiences with us. In other words, should we treat this

[16] For a very good overview of this problem, see Dopierała 2013.

phenomenon as an irreversible cultural change or attempt to maintain the private/public distinction and to respect it in our research as well?

From the perspective of qualitative research, and especially the biographical approach, there are a few aspects of the dilemma that should be commented upon. First, the relation between private and public may involve the process of analysis, which thanks to access to personal/biographical stories may result in the occasional presentation of quite contrasting images of social reality. Analysis discovers social rules and may make interpretations that are opposed to what is claimed officially or by the narrators (as representatives of their environments). In this context, presenting an analysis, which is treated by the researcher as an adequate interpretation of the social process/phenomenon under study, can be related to the dilemma of revealing the private sphere. Second, the relationship of trust, which is regarded as pivotal for interaction with the narrator, may create a situation in which the researcher will have access to data "that would not have been possible via that role alone" (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 106). Third, there are always topics that may be sensitive on the personal or collective level. Each individual has his or her own sensitivity, which must be respected. The boundaries between private and public, though framed by cultural patterns, are very subjective. They may additionally be shaped by different factors, such as generationally defined spheres of privacy and taboo subjects.[17] At the same time, the social definition of sensitivity may change. For example, the topic of sexual minorities used to be a taboo issue, whereas at present it is widely discussed, including by the establishment of specific subdisciplines, such as "queer" sociology. Fourth, due to the "professionalization" of ethics, there is a tendency to avoid the problem of privacy by means of institutional regulations. In this respect informed consent can be used as a kind of "moral magic"—the fact of obtaining it "transforms what would have been an unacceptable intrusion of privacy into a legitimate act" (Hammersley, Traianou 2012: 114).

Conclusions

> In analysing the experience and attitudes of an individual, we always reach data and elementary facts which are not exclusively limited to this individual's personality, but can be treated as mere instances of more or less general classes of data or facts, and can thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming. […] But even when we are searching for abstract laws, life records, as complete as possible, constitute perfect type of sociological material (Thomas, Znaniecki 1918–1920: 1832–1833).

I have started my concluding remarks with a quotation from *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, which I mentioned at the beginning of my paper. Faraday and Plummer (2005: 250) call the above-cited declaration a "powerful entree to the sociological community." In identifying biographical data as the perfect type of sociological material, I think Thomas and Znaniecki could not have anticipated the future discussions on ethical issues

[17] For example, during a biographical seminar, one PhD student presented interviews with women. The main topic of the research was an aspect of femininity connected with the gynaecological sphere and encounters with medical care, especially gynaecologists. The researcher was astonished to notice that it was much more difficult to conduct interviews with older women, who were not willing to share this type of life experience. These women also had difficulties finding the proper (to their mind) language to talk about such experiences.

related to this type of research. As I have tried to show, such discussions have been evoked by increasing reflection on such practices and the need for regulation in this regard. The process was initiated by researchers' self-awareness but also by distinct cultural and technological changes. To summarize briefly: the virtual sphere of our culture, and the constantly developing technical tools of the digital sphere, are providing new opportunities for storing our data, documenting social life, and continuing intergenerational communication. But the virtual sphere also poses new ethical challenges, which are multiplied by the contemporary style of our work. We as researchers are expected to present, make visible, and disseminate our findings, and to share our materials through open access. Obviously, we need regulations and ethical codes, but all these must not lead to a further paradox in which we will feel protected by documents and not obliged to respect the social rules of interaction or to remember that we are engaged in a very human practice: namely, that the research situation in qualitative studies, and especially in the biographical approach, is above all a matter of meeting with another person. One of the costs of increasing institutionalization of different aspects of social life and practices is losing the ability to act according to commonsense social rules during the process of the social construction of reality. In this regard, we can agree that with "the increasing 'professionalisation' of ethics, and its narrow focus on avoiding harm, […] the subjects of research continue to be used in instrumental and even dehumanising ways" (Merrill, West 2009: 177).

Last but not least, I hope that by means of this paper I can bring the discussion into the Polish context. Although such disciplines as psychology or sociology have already established their ethical codes, I have the feeling that in comparison to science in the Anglo-Saxon world we in Poland are not that advanced in implementing various ethical regulations and procedures. I hope that the criticism I have tried to express by quoting Western authors can be treated as an encouragement to Polish scholars to discuss and reflect on research practices and deliberative ethical regulations. Such discussions have already commenced in various social science disciplines. It would be good to learn from the mistakes of others and thus to avoid some of the paradoxes of professional research practices. My thoughts, which are "objective" in Simmel's sense when he describes the position and perspective of the stranger, comprise a position that might not be articulated after the establishment of obligatory procedures.

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