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Rethinking Ethical Questions in Life-History Interview Research

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Abstract

Having interviewed Germans who emigrated to Israel and, in most cases, converted to Judaism, I experienced a paralyzing sense of ethical conflict when I began analyzing the first order discourse my participants and I had co-constructed to transform it into the second-order discourse of research publications. So, I set out to rethink the ethics of life-history interview research. My quest into our ethical responsibilities began with rule-based deontological and consequentialist ethics and the guidelines in the social sciences they inform. It led me to reconsider such core notions as informed consent, privacy, and risk-benefit analysis. I came to realize that rule-based ethics are inherently inadequate for addressing the situation-specific and thus unpredictable ethical questions that arise in conducting and analyzing life-history interviews. Next, I turned to the notion of ethical conflict as arising from obligations to trust and truth and rethought it as responsibilities toward participants and audiences. I realized that our responsibilities extend beyond our interview partners, who entrusted us with their life stories, to the audiences, who engage with our analyses. I furthermore reevaluated using research to advocate for disenfranchised participants and argued for transparency and reflexivity regarding how our subject positions impact knowledge construction.

Keywords

rule-based ethics, life-history interviews, privacy, informed consent, truth and trust

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Introduction

When I began analyzing the life-history interviews I had conducted with Germans who emigrated to Israel and, in most cases, converted to Judaism, I experienced a deep sense of betraying my interviewees' trust when subjecting their life stories to scholarly analysis. Analysis requires examining and questioning the primary sources. It means looking beyond their face-value to explore not only actions but also implicitly and explicitly stated explanations. Initially, I thought my analytical paralysis was because both my interviews and my own subject position differed from those of other scholars and research projects in two significant aspects. Subsequently, however, I came to realize that these two factors only heightened and, perhaps, therefore made me aware of the ethical conflict between the responsibilities to both participants and readers inherent to all qualitative interviewing.

The first aspect in which the life histories I collected differed is that they are exceptionally full of conflicts: inner conflicts about religious conversion, immigration, and acculturation; interpersonal conflicts with life partners, their families, and children, who were growing up in Israel with a German parent; the Holocaust past that is at the core of Israel's foundational narrative; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is inevitably part of everyone's daily lives there. The multitude of these inherently intertwined levels of conflict generated dramatic life stories that easily rivaled a good novel, but they also revealed my interviewees'

vulnerabilities. As Germans living in Israel experience challenges to their sense of self on a regular basis, even if they converted, how could I engage in scholarly analyses that could be considered questioning their life stories and what seemed to me in many cases fragile identities? Moreover, I empathized with many of my interviewees as they had spent years thinking, even agonizing, about their decision to live in Israel as a German, the complexities of religious conversion, their sense of collective Holocaust guilt, and their views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A second initial reason for my analytical paralysis was my own professional background. Interviews radically differ from the literary texts I was used to analyzing in that I knew the narrators, co-created the narratives, and many interview partners wanted to read the book I was planning to write. So why did I leave what in hindsight appears as the vast interpretive freedom of literary studies? A native (East) German, I was trained in German literary studies in the US but became increasingly dissatisfied with postmodern analyses of highbrow literary texts. Though on tenure-track in a German program (where I was later tenured), I transgressed disciplinary boundaries and began working on American popular culture and interview-based life-history research. While these fields seem to have no common denominators and neither seems to relate to things German, I found my way into both through the transdisciplinary field of Holocaust Studies.

Dissatisfied with analyzing highbrow literature, I was unable to follow the academic convention in the humanities of revising my dissertation for book publication to attain tenure. Instead, I wrote a monograph, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media* (2011), from scratch. It was in the process of working on this book that I came to realize that ethical questions are at the forefront of my thinking. I argued that the narrative framework for depicting victimhood and suffering in American popular culture in the binary and therefore ahistorical terms of a melodramatic conflict between absolute good and pure evil, personified in the figures of victim and perpetrator, emerged in media representations of the Holocaust. I radically critiqued both this dominant mode of Holocaust representation and the narrative framework it created for depicting what Susan Sontag (2004) famously called the pain of others in American popular culture as both epistemologically and ethically untenable.

My next book project, tentatively titled *Being German in Israel: Life Histories Between Interethnic Migration, Religious Conversion, and Holocaust Memory* is likewise located in the field of Holocaust Studies but with both a new thematic focus and employing different methodologies. I want to explore the everyday lives and self-identities of Germans who emigrated to Israel and, particularly in the case of women, converted to Judaism as a complex and controversial mode of coming to terms with the Nazi past and the negotiation of their hybrid identities with a focus on their subjective experiences of being German in Israel. The initial idea for this project goes all the way back to a graduate course in Holocaust literature and film. As the only German in this class, I was at times asked for my opinion "as a German" and another student was similarly asked to respond, "as an Israeli," which in turn led to years of conversations between us and my interest in experiencing Israel beyond the confines of tourism. Having learned about interviews as primary sources from conversations with another friend, who was writing her dissertation in Oral History, I applied for post-doctoral funding. I spent a year in Israel, simultaneously reading up on interview methodologies and conducting what became the first round of interviews. Realizing the subject matter and methodology were too unfamiliar and complex to write this book on tenure-track, I set it aside and returned to it after tenure only to encounter analytic paralysis and embark on a quest into professional ethics.

In the first part of my article, I will re-trace my ventures into the rule-based ethical guidelines developed by professional associations in the social sciences as well as the deontological and consequentialist traditions in moral philosophy that constitute their foundation. Professional guidelines tend to limit the complexity of moral dilemmas to

competing sets of rights claims and obligations and seek to determine a normative basis of hierarchically structured principles to resolve conflicts. They also misleadingly imply that all conflicts can be resolved, or even prevented, and focus on those that may arise in conducting rather than analyzing interviews. I continued my quest by delving deeper into deontological and consequentialist ethics that inform the professional guidelines and rethought such core notions as informed consent, anonymity, and risk-benefit analysis. I came to realize that both deontological and consequentialist traditions and the rule-based professional guidelines they inform are unable to address the situation-specific and unpredictable moral dilemmas in interview-based qualitative research.

The second part of the article explores Thomas Couser's (2003) notion of a conflict between what he designates as our obligations to trust and truth. Rethinking it as a continuum, I realized we have a dual responsibility toward our interviewees, which arises from the trust they placed in us when recounting and reflecting on their lives, and toward readers of our publications, who expect them to be truthful in the sense of fulfilling the core requirement of scholarship of critically analyzing our primary sources. While rethinking Couser's ideas, I also reevaluated the notion of advocacy research, when scholars use research as political activism to empower disenfranchised participants and explored the inherently dialogic and co-constructed nature of interviews. I furthermore found it productive to consider interviewees' life stories, their own implicit interpretations, and their explicit self-analyses as first-order discourse and our analyses as second-order discourse. Finally, I argue for transparency and reflexivity to acknowledge differences in power and privilege and explore how our subject positions inform our knowledge production in conducting and analyzing interviews. As the initial motivation for these ethical reflections was my inability to explore the face value of the interviews, I expanded the traditional emphasis of professional ethics on conflicts that emerge in conducting fieldwork to the dilemmas we encounter when analyzing the primary sources and transforming everyday accounts into academic knowledge.

Rethinking Rule-Based Ethics

The ethical guidelines developed by professional associations in the social sciences tend to limit the complexity of moral dilemmas to competing sets of rights claims and obligations and thus encompass rules for evaluating them based on the two dominant traditions in moral philosophy (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). The duty ethics of principles or deontological model, identified with Immanuel Kant, is based on the idea that absolute rules exist and that they must be upheld regardless of the consequences. Actions are governed by universal principles, such as honesty, justice, and respect, which should not be broken, and solely judged by intent (Beauchamp et al., 1982). In the utilitarian ethics of consequences, identified with John Stewart Mill, on the other hand, the rightness or wrongness of actions is judged by their consequences rather than their intent. Utilitarian or consequentialist ethics is based on cost-benefit pragmatism, which means that the primary moral rule, from which all others are derived, is to create the greatest good to the greatest number (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002).

Deontological Ethics and Informed Consent

In deontological ethics, the ideal moral agent is a detached and disembodied self that exists outside particular relationships of interdependence. While duties and rights are universally recognizable and acceptable, the moral self can only be held responsible for autonomous choices, that is, decisions made independently of bodily, social, political, economic, cultural, and historical contingencies (Sevenhuijsen, 1998). The moral subject is thus separate from and above empirical reality and therefore able to objectively determine what

constitutes moral obligations for everyone and how they can be satisfied. Being a moral person is determined as the ability to fulfill obligations and exercise rights. Moral dilemmas are cast as conflicts between rights claims and the task of ethics is to determine a normative basis of hierarchically structured principles to resolve the conflicts (Sevenhuijsen, 1998). Making morally just decisions entails finding rules and applying them to specific cases based on impartiality, rationality, abstraction, and objectivity.

However, when coupled with an atomistic self that exists above and beyond empirical reality, the core universalist notion that justice consists in treating like cases alike means understanding equality as sameness because moral reasoning requires abstracting from and thus neglecting concrete differences between individuals. Only by neglecting social, economic, political, and cultural differences and thus past and present realities of inequality and privilege can universalists argue that sameness in treatment leads to sameness in results. Moreover, conflating equality with sameness means that difference from a universal norm is understood as deviance and Otherness. The dualistic logic inherent in universalism thus not only leads to reasoning in terms of mutually exclusive opposites, such as culture and nature, reason and emotion, freedom and necessity, self and other, public, and private, civilization and primitiveness, but to a system of hierarchy, control and exclusion in which knowledge and power are interdependent (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

Despite such substantial critique, the deontological model still informs interview-based research. Most importantly, the notion of informed consent was derived from the moral principle of autonomy, which stipulates that people must not be used to an end but be considered ends in themselves (Beauchamp et al., 1982). Informed consent requires that potential participants receive accurate, comprehensible, and sufficiently comprehensive information about the project to make an informed decision whether to participate and that there are no potentially constraining circumstances and inducements that may unduly influence this decision (Beauchamp et al., 1982). When these broad requirements are satisfied, participation in a research project is considered a matter of exercising rather than violating a person's autonomy. Consenting participants are not means to the researcher's ends because they have to some extent chosen to adopt those ends as their own.

And while for Kant the ends of an action refer to its purpose, sharing the purpose of an action does not mean sharing all its purposes (Dworkin, 1982). The fact that not all purposes of a research project can be known and thus our participants' consent is always partial thus does not make our projects inherently unethical. However, what exactly participants should know to make their consent to participate an informed decision is situation- and context-dependent and thus impossible to address, let alone regulate, in universal terms. The notion of informed consent, moreover, relies on the dubious dichotomy that consent is either informed and participants are protected or not, which suggests that all ethical issues can be determined and, presumably, resolved at the start of a project. However, as Thomas Couser (2003, p. 6) put it, "consensual relationships involving trusting cooperation have unique potential for treachery."

I only asked participants to sign the consent form after concluding the interview because it is only at this point that they can consent to all of what they said to be used as a primary source. Yet, I still felt uneasy because, though most of them were university-educated, they could not fully understand what using their life story as a primary source meant. So, I gave them the option of withdrawing their consent after they read the interview transcript, which three interviewees did. Although frustrating, given the time- and labor-intensive nature of conducting and transcribing interviews, having consent confirmed, allowed me to overcome my analytical paralysis and begin to generate my own interpretations. Nevertheless, I could never quite ignore that many interviewees had said they wanted to read the book to learn about the experiences of others sharing the subject position of being German in Israel. Knowing

participants may read my second-order interpretations, which necessarily differ and, at times, may also challenge their own first-order interpretations, continues to be challenging, despite erring on the side of caution about informed consent.

Deontological Ethics and Privacy

In rule-based professional ethics, the universalist principle of autonomy and the notion of moral rights are also central to reflections on privacy. Privacy refers to the relative control of access to the self, including the circumstances and especially the extent to which our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and opinions are shared with others. It plays a key role in developing and maintaining self-identity by determining self-other boundaries, that is, the knowledge of where one begins and ends, and managing how information drawn from social interaction is used to define self-other roles (Caplan, 1982). As our research often probes into areas within the private sphere, such as life histories, personal thoughts, trust-based relationships, financial status, personal fantasies, religious beliefs, and political opinions, it can be perceived as overstepping the customary boundary between self and environment and thus as challenging the research participant's sense of an autonomous self (Caplan, 1982).

In addition to the subject matter, the discursive practice of interviewing may also challenge the interviewees' autonomy. The pseudo-private interaction in interviews can generate the misleading impression of confessing to a stranger or exchanging confidences with a friend. Moreover, the need to spontaneously and immediately respond to verbal stimuli as well as the inherent features of storytelling, such as having to develop and conclude an opened narrative, generate a situation that reduces participants' control over self-representation. While interviewees may refuse to answer any question, they must respond in some form and a negative response still provides information, such as to an area of ignorance or sensitivity (Kelman, 1977).

Nevertheless, rule-based professional ethics suggested that while an interviewer may try to circumvent an interviewees' efforts at control to some extent, seeking to penetrate their social facades, the felt pressures are usually like those experienced in regular social interaction. They only constitute ethically objectionable invasions of privacy if the interviewer employs coercive and/or manipulative tactics (Kelman, 1977). However, the extent to which individuals require and are granted privacy varies culturally and historically and universalists cannot address the notion of privacy in situation- and context-dependent terms because they presume sameness among individuals across cultures and through time. As such, universalist rules are epistemologically untenable and practically useless in determining what may constitute a violation of privacy for a particular interviewee in a specific research project.

For example, as the convention in the social sciences to protect participants' privacy through anonymity is grounded in rule-based universalist ethics, it is inherently unable to address the fact that participants may want to use their actual names because "identification is a way through which members of the culture retain control over, that is, continue to 'own,' their ways of 'naming the world'" (Mishler, 1991, p. 125). Anonymity is not necessarily in the best interest of participants, especially if they are "marginal individuals who by setting their own stamp on the life-history written about them make a statement to the world, offering testimony, or bearing witness, about the events that shaped their lives" (Langess & Frank, 1986, p. 126). Anonymity may not only reinforce the asymmetry of power between interviewee and interviewer, who is, after all, named as the author of the study, but through the routine assurance of confidentiality via anonymity, we suggest to interviewees that their personal experiences and convictions will be treated as part of an anonymous mass. In some contexts, anonymity may thus mean that interviewees are and/or feel deprived of their own voices because "not only do many, if not most, questions refer to anyone and not to them in particular, but their answers

will not be connected to them," and thus "they will not be held personally responsible for what they say, nor will they be credited as individuals for what they say and think" (Mishler, 1991, p. 125).

While anonymity may be beneficial in many, maybe even most, interview-based qualitative research projects, a rule that stipulates it as universally advantageous would violate the autonomy of some participants, not least by paternalistically determining them to be incapable of making an informed decision for themselves. As such, rule-based professional ethics grounded in the universalist tradition are logically incongruent as they define potential participants as both autonomous beings capable of making an informed decision about whether to participate in a research project and as non-autonomous subjects in need of patriarchal protection incapable to do so regarding protecting their privacy through anonymity.

In my own project, I eliminated this logical incongruity. Analogous to asking participants to consent to using their life histories as a primary source after the interview and confirm or withdraw it after reading the transcript, I asked the same regarding anonymity. All but one had agreed initially to use their name and confirmed this decision, even though, in many cases, years had passed since the interview. While some explicitly appreciated being given this option, most participants seemed surprised, even confused by the question. It was, after all, their life story, so why would they not want me to use their name?

Utilitarian Ethics and Distributive Justice

While the deontological model of ethics is based on absolute principles and rules, such as autonomy and privacy, and actions are judged by intent, in the utilitarian model, actions are solely evaluated by their consequences. As such, utilitarian or consequentialist ethics is based on the relative value derived from the evaluation of costs and benefits. The moral principle of beneficence, which specifies "a positive obligation to remove existing harms and to confer benefits to others," is supererogatory rather than obligatory (Beauchamp et al., 1982, p. 19). In other words, creating social benefits is always in itself laudable but people are not morally deficient if they fail to do so. Consequently, the principle of nonmaleficence is more immediately relevant for social science research. Nonmaleficence defines moral prohibitions, that is, what actions are not permissible as they inflict harm on another person (Beauchamp et al., 1982). However, at this general level of formulation, the principle of nonmaleficence is vague in its implications. Not only will its applicability depend on the context-specific way "harm" is defined but utilitarian ethics also requires weighing possible harms against anticipated benefits. However, the utilitarian model provides no guidance for approaching moral dilemmas in specific research situations. Not only is there no common standard according to which the apples of harm and the oranges of benefits could be compared but neither can be reliably predicted in the context of fieldwork (Beauchamp et al., 1982).

For example, while professional ethical guidelines suggest that the risks of harm to our participants are comparable to those entailed by quotidian social interactions, such as disappointment or annoyance, we cannot know with certainty whether and to what extent critically analyzing someone's life story may negatively impact their self-identity. And can even the risk of inflicting relatively minor harm on participants be justified by the benefit of increasing scholarly knowledge and potentially furthering our own professional careers? At the very least, risk-benefit analysis must be supplemented by an assessment of the distributive justice regarding who will be put at risk, what kinds of risks are morally acceptable, and who will receive the benefits and thus it can never by itself provide necessary and sufficient conditions for evaluating an action.

The Fallacies of Rule-Based Ethics in Qualitative Interview Research

Both traditions within rule-based ethics are thus inadequate for addressing the situation-specific and unpredictable moral dilemmas in interview-based research. As Norman Denzin put it succinctly, they rely "on a cognitive model that privileges rational solutions to ethical dilemmas (the rationalist fallacy)" and presume "that humanity is a single subject (the distributive fallacy)" (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 25). Moreover, they are untenable when taken to their extreme with the deontological position leading to moral absolutism, that is, the notion that there are absolute principles defining a right action, regardless of the consequences, and the consequentialist model generating the idea that the ends justify the means (Kvale, 1996). Nevertheless, university review boards and professional associations still rely on them as they focus on the conduct of the individual scholar through consideration of ethical codes and the general moral principles underlying these codes, such as do not betray trust and do no harm (de Laine, 2000).

The focus on avoiding harms, informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality through anonymity in the rule-based approach to ethics also tends to give the false impression that rational decisions can be made to resolve, or even to avoid, all ethical dilemmas. As interview-based qualitative research is characterized by fluidity and uncertainty, the complex ethical considerations that permeate it, many of which arise from unanticipated consequences, cannot be adequately addressed by recourse to rule-based ethical guidelines that are inherently static and increasingly formalized (Mauthner et al., 2002). As ethical codes are general and absolute, they make no allowance for socio-cultural differences and therefore cannot address situational and contextual elements, including the diverse and complex power structures inherent to interview situations (de Laine, 2000). While formal rules and codes may be helpful in alerting us to ethical issues, they may also have the effect of forestalling our "reflexive and continuing engagement with ethical research practice," by implying that when the objective, rational and impersonal requirements of codes are met, we have fulfilled our obligations to participants (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 18).

Responsibilities to Participants and Readers

Ronald Grele already wrote in 1975 that while we develop ties to our interviewees, we also serve as critics of the interviews (2006). And Maurice Punch (1986) argued about a decade later that conflicts may arise between our moral obligations to participants and the purpose of our research. Robert Weiss (1994) similarly observed an obligation to our participants and our sponsors, our field, and ourselves to generate critical analyses. More recently, Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner (2002) described the conflict of responsibilities as between relationships and accountability. Perhaps best known, however, is Thomas Couser's (2003) notion of our dual obligations to truth and trust.

I found it more constructive to think about moral acts as arising from responsibility rather than obligation. No longer by definition a burden, the notion of responsibility also enables a more open form of moral deliberation, including "such questions as whether and how we can/want to give shape to responsibilities and how we can deal constructively with dependency and trust" (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 59). Rather than invoking such abstract and vague notions as trust and truth, I would describe our responsibilities as toward our interview partners on the one hand and the scholarly community that constitutes the audience of our publications on the other. We thus have responsibilities toward both our participants, who in communicative interaction with us co-generate the primary sources, and the audience, who critically engage with our arguments in the process of knowledge production.

Interviews as Advocacy versus Dialogue

While participants consented to sharing their life stories with the interviewer as well as the audience of our publications and believed this to be a free and informed decision, they may experience seeing not only aspects of their lives but also and especially our interpretations in print as a betrayal of trust. For example, G. N. Appell (1978) thought he "was doing the ethically correct thing by showing a key informant and friend the results of my work," expecting him to share his own understanding of their relationship:

> [I thought he understood] that he and I were working on a number of different levels. On one level, we were friends. On another level, I was there with a job [...]. On a third level, Frank, as a somewhat disaffiliated member of the community, and I, as an outsider, were standing aside and discussing what we had mutually observed. (p. 88)

However, his participant "felt betrayed, troubled, and guilty, and he wanted to have nothing more to do with me" because "he felt that I had made use of confidences that were shared between us as friends" (Appell, 1978, p. 88).

Given that participants may experience such a serious betrayal of trust, Couser (2003) argued that our primary responsibility is toward participants, essentially proposing advocacy research:

> The justice of the portrayal has to do with whether the text represents its subject the way the subject would like to be represented, with whether the portrayal is in the subject's best interests, with the extent to which the subject has determined it, and with the degree and kind of harm done by any misrepresentation. (p. 338)

Couser's decision to engage in advocacy on behalf of his participants is understandable because he worked with vulnerable subjects. However, such advocacy research creates rather than solves significant ethical problems. As it aims to "build connected and transformative, participatory and empowering relationships with those studied," it not only radically restricts the epistemological realm of research to the disenfranchised, but it defines them as the exotic Other (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 26). Moreover, advocacy not only means speaking for the Other and thus reinforces privileged subject positions by casting the disenfranchised as objects of analyses. It is also and especially appropriative because it fosters speaking as the Other and thus conflating vastly different subject positions based on an uncritical identification with research participants that primarily serves to appease the guilt of the privileged by engaging in liberation fantasies (Czarniawska, 2002).

No matter how participant-led research might be, we play a crucial role in initiating, facilitating, and constructing meanings both in the co-generation of the interviews and their analysis. While our active role tends to be played down by advocates of democratic rapport and participant empowerment, the utopian notion of democratic research relationships "rests on the fantasy that power can be shared and the differing positions occupied by researcher and researched neutralized" (Gillies & Aldred, 2002, p. 43).

In conducting the interviews, we enact significant interpretative power in co-constructing them. Rather than seeking to minimize the inherently dialogic nature of interviews by advocating interviewers speak as little and in as non-directional a manner as possible, as we are told in countless how-to-interview guides, we should acknowledge interviews as dialogic discourse and explore how meaning is co-constructed between two specific interlocutors in a

particular socio-cultural context. And instead of seeking to maintain rapport, as most how-to-interview guides also still advocate, I would argue with Kathy Charmaz (2006, p. 19) that we fulfill our obligations to participants, "by making concerted efforts to learn about their views and actions and to try to understand their lives from their perspectives." However, I would add that truly understanding their lives from their perspectives also means to engage in genuine discussions with interviewees in which we honestly share our own perspectives. Seeking to maintain rapport to facilitate maximum disclosure via instrumental and thus disingenuous empathy is not only ethically untenable but also epistemologically unsound. Avoiding disagreements not only limits what interviewees are able to explicitly share with us but also prevents interviewers from exploring hesitations, contradictions, and silences and thus limits the realm of what we can subsequently analyze. Moreover, it obscures "any opportunities for the interviewee to challenge part or the whole of the interview process because this would appear a breach of the interviewer's (faked) friendship" (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002, p. 112).

Perhaps reflecting the German cultural value that being right far outweighs being polite, I was simply unable to follow the interview guidelines and withhold my own views. It felt like lying to not disagree explicitly when I did not agree with an interviewee. So, I expressed my own ideas and gave participants the opportunity to respond to them. For other interviewers, however, challenging interviewees to debate ideas, especially if they are closely related to their self-identities, may backfire. It is precisely these culturally vastly different values that rule-based ethics is unable to address. Challenging and even explicitly disagreeing with participants worked well in my interviews, most likely, because my participants were likewise German and shared the cultural value of blunt honesty, even when views differed vastly.

For example, the most divergent debate I had was with an aristocrat from a devoutly Christian family in West Germany who converted to Orthodox Judaism and became settler in the West Bank. Contrary to my expectations that I would solely dislike and find no common ground with this participant, I came to appreciate him as a good husband and father. I did acknowledge this in the interview, thus building rapport by being genuine. However, I also radically challenged him by arguing that he is potentially endangering not only his own life but also that of his wife and children by choosing to live in a settlement. Equally genuine in sharing my own political convictions, I debated his claim that as a recent convert to Judaism, his right to live in the West Bank supersedes that of Palestinians, who have lived there for centuries.

Though heated regarding subject matter, the debate remained surprisingly calm as my interview partner expressed his beliefs in a very composed manner. My sense was that he felt superior as a man, an aristocrat, a West German, and a devout believer and that no matter how radical my challenges were, they could not penetrate his defenses. He would simply argue in religious terms and stipulate that having been raised an atheist in East Germany, I just could not understand why he and his family had a divine right to live in the West Bank. I did acknowledge my limited understanding of devout religious belief, but I also upheld my arguments about endangering his family and against his part in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Autonomous Areas.

While the debate had to end with agreeing to disagree since our world views were incompatible, it allowed my participant to address questions that I could not have asked if I had tried to remain largely invisible in the interview and/or to ensure rapport. It also meant that I could be honest in expressing my views in the interview, something my interlocutor did appreciate, despite our radical difference in world views.

Interviews and Interpretations as First- and Second-Order Discourse

When our analyses are largely in sync with participants' self-perception, there is no ethical conflict. They may even come to view their experiences, self-reflections, and sense of

self in a way that enhances and thus benefits their self-understanding. This is often invoked as a tangible benefit to interviewees. A conflict between responsibilities to readers and interviewees only arises with critical interpretations. Slightly or even moderately critical interpretations might be appreciated by interviewees, whose sense of self can handle such challenges and may even lead to personal growth. But substantial critique may not only threaten an interviewee's sense of self but may be experienced as a breach of trust. We may understand our analyses as guided by the requirement of all research to engage in critical thinking and our ethical responsibilities as dual. But participants may well consider questioning the meaning they implicitly and explicitly ascribed to both elements and the entirety of their life stories as destabilizing their identity and/or as making them look bad, both to themselves and others.

While interpretive power is distributed in the co-construction of the interview, in the analytic process it is clearly in our favor and as knowledge is not only a source of enlightenment but also of power, interview analysis constitutes both an epistemological and an ethical practice. After all, we decide whom we quote, at what length and in what context, employing the frameworks and languages of our academic fields, to substantiate arguments on subject matters that are of interest to us and, we hope, other social scientists. Some scholars have even wondered "whether the process of coding interview responses for research purposes itself disenfranchises respondents, transforming their narratives into terms foreign to [them]" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 20).

However, it is more constructive to consider interviewees' life stories, their own implicit interpretations, their explicit self-analyses, as well as our own questions and comments in the interview as first-order discourse, and our subsequent analyses as second-order discourse. The notion of first- and second-order discourse – and likewise the more commonly used understanding of interviews as primary sources – may suggest a hierarchy in which our interpretations are superior. However, I found it more productive to think of both discourses as created for different communicative purposes and for different audiences. The social function of the interviewees' first-order discourse is to create a coherent and credible narrative in sync with their self-identity and sometimes to further disseminate their political, religious, and other agendas. The purpose of second-order discourse in scholarly analyses is to explore the socio-cultural and/or politico-economic structures and processes reflected in the first-order narratives (Reinharz & Chase, 2002). Contrary to the notion that "one must not say in print what would not be said to someone's face," as Marlene de Laine (2000, p. 2) put it, I would argue with Barbara Czarniawska (2002, p. 743) that agreement with the interviewee's first-order interpretations may indicate a lack of courage to develop and defend our own analyses. In taking our dual responsibilities seriously, we should put the life stories participants generously shared with us to optimal scholarly use rather than uncritically accept their own first-order analyses at face value. That said, as conventional publication formats of research articles and monographs are almost entirely composed of our second-order discourse, and it is us who select quotes from the first-order discourse of the interviews, we should be aware of and acknowledge to the audience that our analyses are privileged and use this privilege with caution.

Analysis, Transparency, and Interpretive Power

Given our active participation in the co-construction of interviews and our authorial privilege in their analyses, the methods we employ are not neutral techniques but reflect and reinforce methodological and epistemological assumptions. And, as Andrea Doucet and Natasha Mauthner (2002, p. 139) further argue, it is analysis "where the power and privilege of the researcher are particularly pronounced and where the ethics of our research practice are particularly acute because of the largely invisible nature of interpretive processes." Our responsibility to the audience thus not only includes critical analyses of the interviews but also

and especially to be as transparent as reasonably possible about the "the personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical, epistemological, and ontological" assumptions and influences on our research in general and on the analytic processes (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, p. 125). Such transparency indicates how our acts of knowing are socially situated, that is, "our complex social locations and subjectivities as well as our personal, political, and intellectual agendas" (Reinharz & Chase, 2002, p. 234). Transparency thus requires reflexivity beyond situating ourselves in terms of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, not least because these categories for describing subject positions are often deployed as "badges" indicating one's acknowledgement of differences in power and privilege but without detailed reflections as to how our subject positions and thus our epistemological, ontological, and theoretical assumptions inform conducting and analyzing interviews.

However, as "some of these critical assumptions affecting our knowledge production may not be readily available or known to us," it may be most constructive to think of transparency and reflexivity in relative rather than absolute terms (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002). While we should be as open and transparent as possible at each stage of our research process, "it may take time and engagement with varied academic communities – interpretive or epistemological – before we can actually clearly articulate the multiple influences on our research" (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002, p. 138). As the theoretical and epistemological life of a research project and the knowledge it generates live on long after the project itself has been formally completed, accountability in research is perhaps best understood as a long-term process through which we engage in an ethically responsible manner with those who read, critique, and utilize our work. Laying open our interpretive methodologies and assumptions by making our complex social positions and the process of knowledge construction explicit increases ethical research practices as it encourages us to constantly reflect on our responsibilities to both participants and readers.

Conclusion

The notion of an inevitable conflict between our obligations to trust and truth, in which we can only fulfill our responsibilities to either participants or readers as we decide moral dilemmas guided by rule-based ethical codes, cannot address the complexities of ethical dilemmas arising in qualitative interview projects. Our ethical conflicts can neither be anticipated because they are specific to each social interaction in each project nor can they be resolved, let alone by recourse to abstract rules and principles.

My own question had been whether, to what extent, and how we can critically analyze interviews without violating our ethical responsibilities toward participants. During my quest into our ethical responsibilities the question changed. Having become aware of our dual responsibilities, I next thought about how we can use the first-order discourse of each participant's life story, which we co-generated in the interview, in the most productive way when, adding our own intellectual labor of analysis, we transform it into the second-order discourse of research publications. And, lastly, realizing both our vast interpretive power and the radical difference between interviews and other primary sources due to our dual responsibilities, I began thinking about how to share some of our authorial privilege with participants.

Aware not only of the fallacies of advocacy research and the problems of maintaining rapport and minimizing interviewer impact at the cost of genuine debate but also of the inherently dialogic nature of interviews, I did offer my own views in interviews and gave participants the opportunity to respond to them. Moreover, I only asked for informed consent and whether interviewees preferred anonymity after the interviews were completed. I furthermore asked participants to confirm both decisions after they read the transcripts. And

yet, I still felt uneasy about transforming the first-order discourse of co-constructed life history narratives into the second-order discourse of my scholarly analyses.

As monographs are inherently made up of second-order discourse, even when extensive quotes from interviews are included, as we select and arrange them, the most important outcome of my ethical deliberations was that I began to re-think this publication format. I want participants to tell and interpret their own life stories and allow audiences to read the first-order discourse not only far beyond what even extensive quotes would allow but also before they engage with my second-order interpretations. Provided I can convince an editor to follow me in abandoning the traditional monograph format, I would like to publish select interviews, edited only regarding transforming oral into written language, and add my own analyses in the introduction and conclusion to the book as well as post-scripts to each interview. I may also include brief, typographically offset interpretive comments into the interview transcripts themselves (They will interrupt the narrative flow of the interview, but this may be offset by the potential insight they provide).

While I still select, arrange, edit, and analyze the interviews in line with my research questions, readers will have access to the participants' first-order discourse. This would give the latter significant interpretive power over their life stories and even allow for disagreements between first- and second-order discourse. Moreover, it is also in the interest of the audience who can evaluate to what extent my analyses seem valid. Finally, I expect this format to facilitate greater self-reflection regarding my analyses, especially when they differ from my participants own, first-order interpretations.

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Author Note

I am an Associate Professor of German at Wayne State University. The ideas for the submitted article manuscript emerged in the context of conducting and analyzing the qualitative interviews for my second book project tentatively *titled Being German in Israel: Life Histories Between Interethnic Migration, Religious Conversion, and Holocaust Memory* as I sought to solve a wide range of ethical dilemmas, most importantly my sense of betraying the trust of my interviewees by critically analyzing the interviews. Please direct correspondence to rothe@wayne.edu.

Dedication: I would like to dedicate this article to my sons Anton and Jonas. They had to go to preschool for an extra month, before staying home with me over the summer, so I could revise the manuscript. I hope that one day, they will come to appreciate some of the ideas outlined here. While Anton thinks about the world like the engineer, he wants to become in trying to figure out how things work, Jonas is already pondering complex ethical questions at the age of four. Having noticed my lack of excitement at seeing a pick-up truck with flags during the Trump/Biden election, I had to explain who Trump is. Ever since, Jonas keeps asking whether Trump wants to be mean, likes to be mean, was even mean as a kid, and likes doing things Jonas knows to be wrong, such as, destroy nature and hit people. He never seems

quite satisfied with my answers. A critical mind and, perhaps, a moral philosopher in the making.

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