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Interviewing for life-histories, lived situations and personal experience:
The Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) on its own and as part of a
multi-method full spectrum psycho-societal methodology

BNIM as a methodology for exploring lived-experiences through biographic narrative interviews has been used over the past fifteen or more years in a variety of collective research projects, either more or less directly (e.g. Rosenthal 1998, Chamberlayne et al 2002, Froggett et al 2005) or in a modified version).

It has also already started to be used in individual PhDs – completed UK PhDs include Lisanne Ackermann (Oxford University), Tanya Campbell-Breen (University of East Anglia), Kip Jones (de Montfort University), Emma Snelling (Plymouth University), Margaret Volante (University of East London). Others are now close to completion (e.g. Elvin Aydin, Essex University) and we know of another 14 or so in process (Universities of Auckland, Dublin, Central Lancashire, East London, Exeter, Leicester, Kings College London, Oxford Brookes, Plymouth).

Training and introductory courses have been run in at different places in the UK, in New York and in Auckland. Sessions have been run under the aegis of departments or research centres in several universities (Middlesex, Open University, Central Lancashire, East London and Plymouth) and under the aegis of the UK ESRC's National Council for Research Methods (NCRM). In 2006) training courses are planned for London in June 2006, for Sydney (September 2006), and (supported by the British Council) for Slovenia (November 2006). Further ones are planned for 2007 and after.

Assuming that "narrative expression" is expressive both of conscious concerns and also of unconscious cultural, societal and individual presuppositions and processes, BNIM supports research into the lived experience of individuals and collectives. It facilitates understanding both the 'inner' and the 'outer' worlds of 'historically-evolving persons-in-historically-evolving situations', and particularly the *interactivity* of inner and outer world dynamics. As such, BNIM lends itself particularly to both psycho-dynamic *and* socio-dynamic approaches, serving specialists of both the 'psycho' and the 'societal', but *especially* those researchers wanting a tool that supports a fully psycho-societal understanding in which neither sociological nor psychological dynamics and structures are neglected or privileged, and in which both are understood not statically but as situated historically. This can provide a firm basis for policy.

The methodological focus on *biographic-narrative-based* research does *not* mean that the research product has to take the form *of a collection of accounts of individual biographies or experiences*; it may do, but at least as often it doesn't. Exploring the particularity of individual experiencing and mutating subjectivity in unique historical and societal locations and processes through biography-*based* research lays the basis for systematic later 'whole case' comparisons, yes, but it also lays a basis for comparisons of situated practices and processes of different interest to the researcher, thus enabling grounded

description and theorisation about a frequently *different* object of study·

Consequently, the object of study, this focal unit of research, analysis and presentation, can be that of multi-generation families (Rosenthal; Brannen), organisations (Sostris Phase 2; Froggett et al), learning cultures (Volante), relationship patterns between clients and/or service professionals (Bolton, Snelling; Curran and Chamberlayne), informal cultures of caring (Chamberlayne and King; Jones, Jones and Rupp), effects of formal 'interventions' (Hopkins and Higgins) modes of cultural transmission of patterns of feeling and behaviour… as well as of individuals experiencing historical changes and transitions between regimes at the micro and the macro level (Rosenthal; Sostris Phase 1; Breckner et al.; Chamberlayne and Spano; Ackermann; Semenova, Humphrey et al and many others).

A key feature of biographical research into people's lived experience of their lives and situations is concern for the variety of past and present, dominant and less dominant perspectives that they hold on those experiences and that they held in those experiences. As opposed to other methods (such as 'attitude' surveys and interviews) that elucidate mostly dominant and explicit and 'official press-release' present-time perspectives, BNIM, through its focus on eliciting narratives of experience rather than (just) explicit statements of 'position', facilitates the expression and detection of implicit and often suppressed perspectives in the present as well as earlier perspectives (and counter-narratives) that are no less contradictory and emotional (see discussion in *Short Guide to BNIM*).

Consequently, BNIM is particularly suited for longitudinal process studies, since it asks for retrospective whole stories and particular incident experiences prior to the first BNIM interview. It can access vanished and mutated times, places, states of feeling and ways of living. Subsequent BNIM interviews can then be used: such later interviews may elicit later retrospectives from potentially new perspectives on the same period up to the first BNIM interview, as well as on the subsequent period since the first BNIM interview. BNIM can thus be used as part of before-and-after particular intervention studies, as in the ongoing study of a particular therapeutic intervention programme in Glasgow for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome patients.

A note: You might wish to think about the relation between the BNIM interviewing procedure and the BNIM interpretation procedure.

The BNIM method of narrative interviewing is one which, if followed, will provide you with a relatively coherent 'whole story' or 'long narration' with a relatively large number of recalled 'particular incident narratives' (PINs) inserted within that long narration (in the first of 2 subsessions) or brought up afterwards (in the second of 2 subsessions). This provides rich material for *any* method of narrative interpretation. There are many methods of interpreting narrative material: the BNIM procedures are just one. It is perfectly possible for you to generate material by way of the BNIM interview, but use a non-BNIM way of interpreting that material.

The opposite is not quite as true. To work at its best, the BNIM method of narrative interpretation requires such long 'Whole Story + Particular Incident Narratives' improvised narrative material. If you have narrative interviews in which there is a lot of *guidance and a lot of structuring by the interviewer* at the beginning and/or during the course of the interview, then such material is not best interpreted using BNIM procedures (which is not to say that no value can be gained by using them). In BNIM terms, the text is too much of a co-production of the interviewee and interviewer to be a clear guide to the expression of the interviewee on their own.

In addition, it should be said that researchers using 'polished' biographical narratives (written out and corrected) are *not* likely to benefit from BNIM, since *the improvised nature* of the interview self-expression is crucial to the understanding of subjectivity.

We think that in terms of understanding 'subjectivity-in-historical-situation' – we could as well say – 'a flow of historical situations as witnessed and experienced by a particular subjectivity' -- the BNIM interview interpreted with the BNIM procedures is a powerful and delicately sensitive tool. The BNIM interview can also be interpreted perfectly well using other interpretive procedures, but the BNIM interpretive procedures for understanding 'subjectivity in situation' works best when applied to the material generated by improvised BNIM interviews. *Why* is developed further in the *Short Guide to BNIM*.

The 'Telling of the Told Story': Formal narratology or reading for the experiencing subjectivity?

Previous accounts (including the textbook Wengraf 2001) identified the two tracks of BNIM interpretation as that of the 'lived life' and that of the 'told story'. In the current version of the *Short Guide*, I refer to the second track as that of the 'telling of the told story', and have tried to specify more clearly how BNIM's 'Thematic Field Analysis' (despite its name) is very different from that which might emerge from a formal-textualist literary analysis of the 'basic theme' of a given text Why the difference? In such a textualist analysis, the subjectivity of the Real Author is often held to be a matter of indifference. In BNIM's TFA procedure, on the other hand, the 'telling' is as important as the 'told', since we are concerned with reconstructing the subjectivity (the Real Author) that is struggling to tell and not-tell over the duration – and through the process -- of the telling of the told. The significance of the 'telling' can lie as much or more in the 'asides', in patterns of apparently trivial idiosyncratic expression, as it can in the formal exposition of the 'story' or the 'theory' on which the speaker is focusing their self-presentational attention. We are looking for the 'basic theme' *not of the story-text* but *of the person behind the text* (subjectivity in historical situation). Jameson has very appositely remarked that "in narrative analysis what is most important is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus (Jameson 2005: xiii)".

Obviously, more formalist narratologists would disagree: they are doing something else. A formal-textualist narratologist (300 variants of the story known to some as 'Cinderella') is interested in the deep structure *of the story*.

In Wengraf (2001: pp.368-77) I provide an example of a Greimas 'narrative analysis' which is purely formal and quite powerful of a told story, one provided by Harold the miner.   However, the *telling* of that story is analysed elsewhere in the text in BNIM terms as 'clues' to the subjectivity of Harold as he told that story: see two variations of me-as-researcher-told story about Harold, one more sociological and one more psychological (Wengraf 2001. 363-65). Why the difference (or complementarity)?

BNIM researchers are more interested in *the deep structure of the subjectivity-in-situation telling* that story (or partly or even totally failing to tell it). The 'Implied Author' of the telling of the story may well be far from identical with the Real Author who lived the life. In comparing the subjectivity inferred from the analysis of the telling of the story to that inferred from the living of the life, we are interested in the deep structure (and mutations) of the subjectivity that generated both. *Somebody's life may show them as battling to succeed and succeeding over and over again; they may tell the story of that life as a perpetual victim story. What is the nature of the subjectivity-in-situation that gave rise both to the real-life battling indicated in the lived-life pattern and to the implied victim indicated in the telling-of-the-told-story pattern?*   An interest in the biographical data of the lived life and some research of the historical context(s) of that life can often suggest the nature of a possible difference between the 'real author' and the 'implied author'. Hence the value of a two-track approach to understand (defended) tellings.

Above are extracts from different parts of the **2006** *version of the* **Short Guide to BNIM.** If you are interested in a copy of the most recent version, please contact me.

On the next pages, you will find first of all a very summary indication of BNIM and of a movement towards BNIM-plus (a four-method psycho-societal methodology focusing on the meso-organisational level) looking at 'defended organisational regimes in historical transition'. Psycho-dynamics remain powerful when going beyond the intra-personal up towards the 'organisational level'. Similarly, socio-dynamics remain powerful when moving down from world and national-societal systems down to the 'organisational level'. The organisational level seems then a good choice for illumination both by psycho-dynamic and by socio-dynamic concepts and methods (see Wengraf 2004b *'BNIM and the psycho-societal challenge: towards a psychoanalytically-informed institutional ethnography, and/or vice-versa, but above all both*).

After that, there are some diagrams relating to BNIM and BNIM-plus, and then a short bibliography.

BNIM to BNIM Plus :
towards a full-spectrum micro-macro-meso psycho-societal methodology

Summary

BNIM: Biographic-narrative-interpretive method (BNIM) interviews for life-history and lived experiences (*Cultures of care, Social strategies in risk society – persons and innovative agencies*; *Homelessness agencies: staff and clients*)

    A. Interview protocol has three subsessions.
        1. Non-interrupted initial narrative
        2. 'Internal questioning' of points raised in the initial narrative.
        3. Third session

    B. Interpretation procedure has two tracks that come together
        1. Two tracks. Lived-life 'objective event'. Telling-of-told-story 'interactive performance event'.
        2. Interpretation of each track is initiated by 3-hour heterogeneous panel.
        3. Interpretation is typically 'chunk-by-chunk' future-blind interpretation to simulate and situate ditto subjectivity of actor

    BNIM-plus. A more complete psychosocietal 4-method methodology was developed during a three years qualitative evaluation of an organisation: a Healthy Living Centre in East London *(Bromley by Bow)*.
        W. BNIM interviewing and other interviews
        X. Ethnographic participant observation of everyday life and selected meetings and activities (nr Tavistock-type 'institutional observation') – including material infrastructure and artworks
        Y. Action Research 'joint project' between researchers and insiders
        Z. Documentation of the organisation and its context

Evolution towards a full-spectrum psycho-societal methodology with frame of 'organisational regimes in historical transition' as privileged observatory

Outer-world

1. German *Quatext* study (Rosenthal 1998) of Nazi regime and Holocaust event: three-generation impact study of families of victims and perpetrators (Nazi and post-Nazi regimes)
2. *Cultures of Care in Britain and the two Germanies*. Formal welfare regimes in distinct socio-cultural settings; 'choices' by family carers and their consequences
3. *Sostris* 7-country EU study **Part 1**: socio-biographies of (different categories of) people under nationally and locally different welfare/ illfare regimes and transitions to Anglo-Saxon 'risky business' societies. **Part 2**: studies of innovative agencies in these transitions, some neo-liberal and others not.

4. *Bromley-by-Bow innovative agency* then studied for three years = "how (well) it works" multi-method (BNIM-plus) qualitative evaluation study.

Methodological (inner-history) movement

A. *Semi-defended, semi-exploratory subject in different demi-neglectful/oppressive regimes* in Britain and Nazi and post-Nazi Germanies (Rosenthal; *Cultures of Care*) based on the 'very repressive' inner and outer-world regimes of Nazi Germany and post-war collective 'denial' and wanting to 'not know'. *Sostris* study was similar: semi-defended subject in demi-neglectful regimes covering quite long life-times of mutating and cross-border transitions.

B. Move towards more sharply-defended and psycho-dynamically-based and articulated notion of Hollway and Jefferson's *'defended subject'* to be quickly complemented by BNIM's stress on that *of the defended researcher and the key role of the panel in 'forcing' greater objectivity about that intersubjectivity.*

C. Limitations of the *'psychosocial interview alone'* (I associate with an article of Simon Clarke) as sufficient base for full psycho-societal understanding. The 'experienced lifeworld' of BNIM/FANI interviewed subjects was not enough – even with brief observation of material context and a document or two – to infer the *'invisible hand' of the transitions in the 'world-system' and the 'regimes in historical transition' of national societies and local societal spaces.*

D. The *psycho-dynamics of the local and immediate psychosocial* (interview + ethnographic / *institutional* observation) needed to be supplemented by independent exploration of the *historical socio-dynamics of the meso and macro societal- context.* The *'organisation' as a privileged locus* for psycho-dynamic and socio-dynamic methodologies to intersect powerfully.

E. *Bromley-by-Bow study (2002-5):* a single-organisation, short-time-span single-society/place study, lacking the power of cross-national, cross-regime, comparative study. However, generously funded for a rich study of the local psycho-societal by researchers from several disciplines, it could focus on the *'agency /organisation' as object of study.* It posed strongly the question of (four)'defended researchers' in interaction with each other and with the organisation as semi-detached object of study. Moments of 'being defensive and being divided' within the research team both in- and between themselves but also as mirroring the defenses/explorations of the Centre. … This *contributed towards greater 'self/understanding'* of the Centre, and of the researchers about 'defended subjectivity within research'. It showed the need for *micro-inner and macro-outer world methodologies and concepts not to add together and pass by, but to meet at the meso level and engage in transdisciplinary self-confrontational teams of semi-defended but would be exploratory researchers*… and the value of doing this for psycho-societal

research.

Figure 1 BNIM Interview SQUIN + Subsessions

A SQUIN: Single Question aimed at inducing Narrative(s)

"Can you please tell me your life story
    [story of your life since X since you first came across Y until Z] : variants
   All the experiences and the events which were important for you,
personally, up to now,

   Start wherever you like
   Please take the time you need
   I'll listen first, I won't interrupt
   I'll just take some notes in case I have any further questions for after
   you've finished telling me about it all"   *Repeat first para.*

Three Sub-Session Structure

ONE. Initial SQUIN - and initial response/account

-   facilitation but no direction or interruption
-   unspecified narrative questions if necessary
-   note taking on topics for Subsession 2

TWO. Narrative Questions on MentionedTopics
only

- only topics raised in subsession ONE
- only in the order of their raising
- only using the words used by the narrator

maybe after analysis of material from ONE / TWO

THREE. All further questions relevant to the
Interests and Theories of the Researcher
- some topics may arise from ONE or TWO
- others almost certainly won't

Figure 2 BNIM 2-track interpretation procedure

CRQ 1: What are the **dynamics of the case-evolution**

CRQ 2: What is the **case-history**?

Living of lived life *analysis* pattern

Telling of told story *analysis* pattern

What we do learn from
the micro-analysis
of selected segments
of verbatim transcript?

What are the results
of the Biographic
Data Analysis?
(BDA)

What are the results
of the Thematic Field
Analysis?
(TFA)

What is the
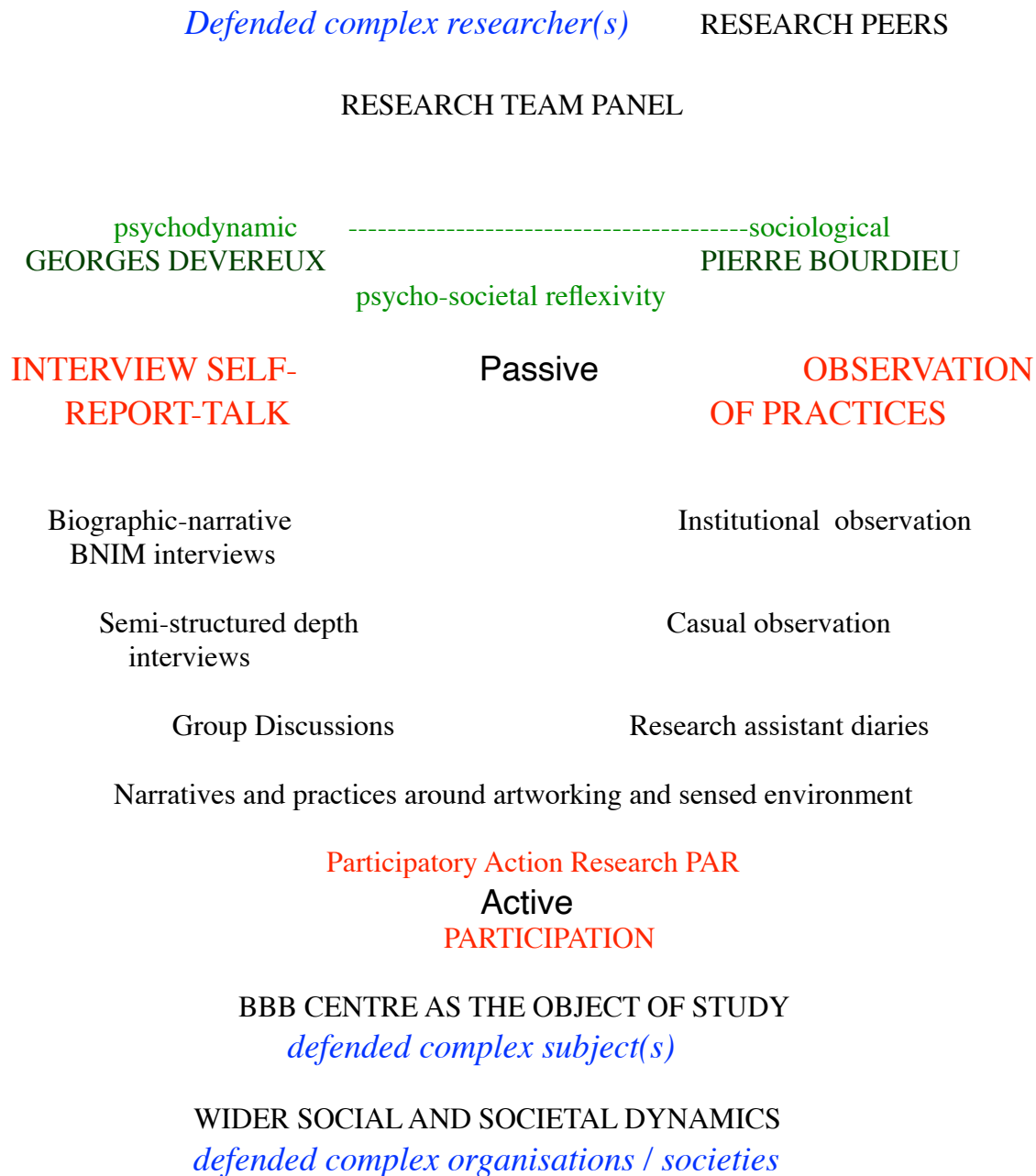Biographic Data
Chronology?
(BDC)

What is the
Text Structure
Sequentialisation?
(TSS)

Outside Data
Field-notes +
other interviews
documents

socio-hist research

The BNIM
Narrative Interview
Material
tape + transcript

Figure 3 BNIM + Triangulated psycho-societal methodology B3 + Doc's

Defended complex researcher(s)   RESEARCH PEERS

RESEARCH TEAM PANEL

psychodynamic   ---sociological
GEORGES DEVEREUX   PIERRE BOURDIEU
psycho-societal reflexivity

INTERVIEW SELF-   Passive   OBSERVATION
REPORT-TALK   OF PRACTICES

Biographic-narrative   Institutional observation
BNIM interviews

Semi-structured depth   Casual observation
interviews

Group Discussions   Research assistant diaries

Narratives and practices around artworking and sensed environment

Participatory Action Research PAR
Active
PARTICIPATION

BBB CENTRE AS THE OBJECT OF STUDY
defended complex subject(s)

WIDER SOCIAL AND SOCIETAL DYNAMICS
defended complex organisations / societies

 Based on the experience of the Bromley-by-Bow research into a Healthy Living Centre, the diagram above illustrates the three points of a multi-method self-triangulating and complementary methodology using BNIM and other methods for a psycho-societal research project. 'Georges Devereux' stands for psychodynamic reflexivity, 'Pierre Bourdieu' for sociodynamic reflexivity: they combine into psycho-societal reflexivity!

   Late PS: This diagram should include past and present **'archive documentation material'** to complement the past and present '**oral history**' material of BNIM and other retrospectives. Sorry for the omission. Tom.

BNIM Plus Bibliography A: short list by topic area

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