

CHAPTER 6

Biographic Interviews

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Every day, thousands of people across the globe get up, get dressed, and go to work . . . for an IO. In fact, IOs would not have much agency beyond the parchments that establish their rational-legal authority if it were not for privileged and precarious individuals acting in their name. As Yi-Chong and Weller poignantly remind us, “IOs are not only the world of powerful states but also a world of many ‘puzzled’ people whose daily life is to assess options and make choices” (2018: 7). To enter into the situated, lived, and imagined worlds of individuals that “make up” IOs, this chapter offers up biographic interviews, or life stories, as a methodological lever.

What?

Grouping together a wide range of approaches from autobiography and autoethnography to oral history and life history, biographic research is characterized by its unrivaled concern with “researching lives and the stories people tell about them” (Merrill and West 2009: 2). Through direct and indirect observation, biographical research reconstructs an individual’s life, past, present, and foreseen future, recognizing the agency of individuals in creating meaning while capturing their dynamic interplay with sociohistorical forces. Combining the objective and subjective, in-depth interviews represent just one of several tools amenable to biographic research.

By default firsthand, retrospective narratives lured out of subjects and coproduced with an inquirer, biographic interviews—or life story interviews—have a scattered disciplinary past. Now prominent in a wide

range of fields, biographic interviewing is most deeply rooted in the methodological worlds of history and sociology. Slowly since the mid-twentieth century, the conjuncture of multiple intellectual moves—from the advent of social constructivist theories to the rise of postcolonial and feminist thought to a revived historical interest in the everyday—has led to a “biographical turn” in the social sciences. Creating a space for the historically undocumented and the socially marginalized to be weaved into or against grand narratives, this biographical resurrection has enabled a more pluralized, multilevel view of politics, economy, and society.

As far as IOs go, biographical approaches are on the rise, with researchers turning to interviews to reconstruct the career trajectories, untangle the complex identities, and trace the practices of the individuals embodying IOs (Emmerij et al. 2005; Pouliot 2016). Reflections on the epistemology, practice, and ethics of biographic interviewing in IOs and global governance research, however, remain rather scant (Roth 2015: 9; Dezalay and Garth 2002).

Why?

While the expansion of IO studies as a subfield has been coupled with an undeniable pluralization of methodological research strategies, as this handbook clearly corroborates, biographical interviewing continues to occupy a marginal position. Yet if we take seriously the claim that the lived experiences, trajectories, and worldviews of ordinary individuals constitute the sociological flesh and bones of IOs, life stories act as a powerful instrument for accessing micro-realities that ultimately shape global governance.

Though biographic interviewing need not be exclusive, leaving the possibility of incorporating biographic questions into a more traditional qualitative interview, it is particularly adept at bringing the agency and subjectivity of individuals into the analytical foreground. Sensitive to the socializations, education, beliefs, career aspirations, experiences, perceptions, collegial relations, and personal relationships of IO professionals, biographic interviews offer insights into micro-level dynamics that condition meso- and macro-level phenomenon, such as change and stability in IOs or transformations in international order. Endowed with the potential to disrupt dominant ontological framings of IOs and pluralize global governance lifeworlds (Roth 2015), biographic interviews perform the dual task of disruption/reconstruction through four types of enactments: personifying, informalizing, historicizing, and unclosing.

Personifying IOs. Close your eyes and imagine the United Nations. What comes to mind? Perhaps an azimuthal projection of the globe cradled in olive tree branches, long rows of state flags, or the newly renovated Security Council chamber for the UN connoisseur. But what about the UN workforce? Like the unidentifiable civil servant holding a briefcase portrayed in Magnús Tómasson's sculpture *Unknown Bureaucrat*,¹ the IO workforce is, for the most part, faceless (Reinalda, Kille, and Eisenberg 2018). By asking interviewees about personal matters, such as their youth or what motivated them to pursue an international career, biographic interviews give the means to personify and deimpersonalize IOs (Emmerij et al. 2005; Yi-Chong and Weller 2018).

Informalizing IOs. On paper, IOs appear as disembodied, impersonalized rational politico-bureaucratic machines governed by formal rules, procedures, and processes. In principle, subordinates report to their hierarchical superiors, organizational policies are respected, and professional misconduct is reprimanded. However, the reality of how IOs function is far more complicated, often left out of official records that build an appearance of coherence and order. Supporting a nascent impulse to study IOs not as they should function but as they do function (Littoz-Monnet 2020), biographic interviews open up insights into informal practices and relations that structure the everyday life of IOs (Roth 2015).

Historicizing IOs. Many individuals pass only fleetingly, for the duration of a summer internship or a short-term consultancy, through the doors of an IO office. Others, however, spend years if not their whole careers there, like a fly stuck to the wall. Albeit to varying degrees depending on career trajectories, biographic interviews targeting the past work experiences of interviewees help fill in the historical gaps that official documents fail to convey or conveniently omit. Life stories force a dialectical rereading of formal documents as primary registers of IO activities, as they nuance and complicate grand historical narratives about IOs and global governance (Reinalda 2021).

Unclosing IOs. Given their focus on individuals or groups as primary units of analysis, biographic interviews provide the heuristic means to traverse or dismantle the organizational boundaries of IOs. If participant observation and interviewing have drilled holes into the edifices of IOs, biographic interviews engage in acts of perforation but have the added feature of drawing transversal lines across institutional spaces to better capture the circulation of people, ideas, knowledge, and policies (see box r—*Studying Ideas*). Destabilizing the closed container image of IOs, life stories reveal

1. Sculpted by Magnús Tómasson; photo by Varfolomeev via Creative Commons.

porosity by making visible “revolving doors” (Seabrooke and Tsingou 2020) between sectors, institutions, or scales classically conceived of as separate from one another.

How?

Lending themselves to multiple uses, biographic interviews can be conducted in a more or less structured manner, in formal or informal settings, multiple times over the course of an individual’s life or in a single instance, with or without a recording device. In comparison to more generic qualitative interviews, biographic interviews are particularly intimate, interactionist, and intrusive (Demazière 2008: 19; Merrill and West 2009: 18). Focused on individuals and their lifeworlds, they create scenarios that will necessarily challenge one’s neutrality and are marked by asymmetric power relations (Demazière 2008: 17–20). Given these specificities and lessons learned in my own research experience (Beerli 2018), there are at least three aspects of biographic interviewing that demand special attention: self-presentation, interview settings, and question framing.

Presenting the self. Negotiating and maintaining entry into the lives of others passes through many unspoken forms of communication. As the impression you give will mold the type of relation you are able to establish (Demazière 2008), be attentive to how to carry yourself. For starters, adapt your attire, dressing more or less formally based on your knowledge of the field and the nature of the meeting place. Charged thoughts may reverberate in facial expressions and body gestures so try to suspend judgement when receiving narratives, practicing a strategy of empathetic listening. Sit in a relaxed fashion, maintaining direct and engaged eye contact, but with a softened, relaxed gaze. When possible, create parallels between yourself and your counterpart, but refrain from talking too much. Also, don’t be too discouraged when interviewees remain reserved or respond unkindly to questions, as IO professionals are not accustomed to speaking about work and their private lives with strangers.

Setting the stage. Settings can have interactional effects so give some thought to the location of the interview, privileging sites that offer privacy and create an environment of ease, intimacy, trust, and release. In a first instance, let the interviewee propose a meeting spot, as they are likely to suggest a familiar place where they will feel comfortable. More often than not, you will be asked to meet at their workplace. Avoid meeting rooms or public office spaces such as a cafeteria or coffee corner, though, where exposure,

interruptions, and competition for shared spaces will create time constraints and favor self-censorship. Guaranteeing privacy while giving you a glimpse into everyday work life, well-concealed individual offices are more ideal settings. Outside locations, such as coffee shops or restaurants, are another possibility. Try to avoid meal-time meetings, especially for a first interview, though, as dining can be distracting. The most intimate of conceivable locations, private homes will occasionally be opened to you, notably when dialoguing with retirees or people with whom you share personal ties. When a face-to-face interview is not possible, opt for a video call over a voice-only call. If ever the setting is off-putting, no matter the location, just end the interview early and reschedule for another time, in another place.

Cultivating moderate egocentricity. Invariably anthropocentric, biographic interviewing encourages respondents to narrate events through their experiences (Merrill and West 2009). To cultivate moderate egocentricity, without awakening the narcissist or paralyzing the timid, opt for question formulations that emphasize human agency, even when talking about global politics and policy processes. If, for example, researching agenda-setting processes, ask your interviewee “what role did you and your team play in framing women’s reproductive rights as a global issue?” not “what role did UN Women play?” Having already forewarned your interviewee about your use of a biographic method, begin with questions such as “Can you tell me about your current role/position?,” progressively working your way toward more intimate discussions about life choices, events, and relationships. Without seeming insincere, end an interview by valorizing your interviewee’s story and thanking them for opening up.

What Challenges?

Incommensurate with other types of interviews, biographic interviews delve deep into the realm of the personal, the intimate, and the secretive. As they navigate through the dilemmas of infiltrating and writing on private spaces (Arthur and Kurvet-Käosaar 2015), biographic interviewers will undoubtedly encounter at least three challenges, whose consequential effects can be, at the minimum, partially mitigated.

The missing, the fuzzy, and the false. Life stories are prone to be incomplete and even slightly embellished (Bertaux and Kohli 1984). This makes it all the more important to gently steer interviewees to speak to life events that are of greatest interest to the researcher. Yet if there is a considerable temporal distance between past experiences and the present or if the interviewee’s

memory is incomplete, important details may be forgotten and fuzzy. When confronted with gaps, try asking your interviewee the same question at a later time by email or over the phone; when possible, triangulate interviews with other sources (i.e., other interviews, organizational reports, grey literature, etc.). But don't kill yourself over getting the "full story" as the devil isn't always in the detail. Always slightly orchestrated, narratives might contain exaggerations, inaccurate accusations, intentional silences, and distortions. As opposed to confronting an individual about misrepresentations, consider such tales in relation to sensemaking processes and the relational positionality of the storyteller in a particular social space.

Emotional debris, self-awareness, and oversharing. As interviewees dig into the personal and the intimate, making connections between their inner and outer worlds, they may be brought to confront emotionally charged situations from the past or dive into a state of self-awareness. For individuals in high-stress, demanding working environments, biographic interviews can offer individuals an opportunity to self-reflect on the paths they've followed, sometimes resulting in personal breakthroughs and expressions of gratitude. Playing an unlicensed therapist can be quite time-consuming and delicate, though, as interviewees are more likely to tangent and maybe overshare about psychological issues, relationships, and the like. When interviewing IO professionals such as humanitarians or peacekeepers who are hypermobile and/or traumatized by close encounters with death, destruction, and suffering (Roth 2015), the researcher may be confronted by heavy emotional debris. In such instances, move away from the position of an opportunistic, time-pressed data-hunter, recasting yourself as an empathetic listener. In moments of emotional intensity, let the conversation take its course. No matter how irrelevant things may seem, avoid rushing to your next question, which might leave your counterpart feeling vulnerable and used. Unsure of where a conversation might lead, it's best to allow yourself ample time, say two or three hours, for each interview.

Ethics. Approaching personal lives as gateways into IO and global governance lifeworlds comes with great ethical considerations and responsibilities. Whether or not imposed by a research ethics committee, ethical awareness should guide your practices throughout each stage of research—not just at the beginning or the end. Before beginning an interview, work out how the material can be used, navigating between your intentions and the interviewee's concerns. When writing and preparing to publish, you will likely need to fully anonymize your interviewee's identity to protect their privacy and avoid causing them or people they mention reputational and professional harm. This is particularly necessary when the "dark side" of IO

life had been exposed. Just changing or omitting an interviewee's name won't always be sufficient for guaranteeing external as well as internal anonymity (Wiles et al. 2008). Depending on the scenario, you may have to avoid specifying for what organization, when, and where your interviewee worked. When deciding how to handle intimate details laid bare in an interview, be utilitarian, only divulging sensitive information when it is truly essential for your argument.

Though not for every researcher, biographic interviewing—when done with sensitivity, respect, patience, and social awareness—offers a unique entry into the multiple realities of IOs through the perspective of the individuals that incarnate them.

To Go Further

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