

Method in Action Case Studies:

Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method Interviewing (BNIM) Wengraf (2005): A Critical exploration of why some individuals with similar backgrounds do and do not become involved in street gang culture and the potential implications for their future lifestyles.

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Abstract:

In 2010 as a pre-registered PhD student at the University of Chester, I began looking at possible qualitative methodological ways to study the subject of deviancy abstention, specifically why some disaffected youth situated in predominantly two areas of Merseyside not only desisted from the growing number of street gangs, but also from youth crime and Anti-social behaviour overall. In general previous work from a methodological perspective has focused heavily on the face to face semi structured interview, This study has attempted to break away from that golden strangle hold by utilising a method developed by Tom Wengraf (2001) called Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM).

The following case study highlights the author's attempts to combat specific methodological problems that were identified while piloting on young people both male and female who met an ethically self-imposed 18-25 age criterion. The case attempts to provide the reader with an insight into some of the difficulties and challenges the author encountered while employing an approach that has in the past centred on much older adult participants in a health or nursing setting. Moreover the case catalogues some of the author's efforts to adapt BNIM in such a way that was employable on young people.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the case you should:

Have an understanding of some of the issues and methodological challenges involved in using biographical narrative interpretive method on young people;

Understand the role of researcher and respondent during interviewing, in particular the sometimes sensitive interviewer/interviewee relationship;

Have an awareness of the importance of empathy during interviews with disaffected youth;

Gain an insight into some of the obstacles when engaging with hard to reach Disaffected working class youth.

Deviancy abstention, disaffected youth and gang culture-project overview and context

The last ten years has seen a dramatic rise in the number anti-social behaviour incidents relating to youth crime, and in particular the “street gang” phenomenon. Over this past decade, due mainly to the failure of both central and local government to accept and react to the problem, such street gangs have now become embedded within some of the UK’s most socially excluded and culturally deprived communities (Pickles, 2009).

The aim of this study which to date, is presently on-going is to examine the influence of street gang social identity on disaffected youth living in two socially excluded areas of Merseyside. Specifically it is my intention to explore why some individuals are drawn to deviant group activity that involves anti-social behaviour/street crime, while others from similar socio/economic backgrounds and demographic environments, surrounded by the same peer counter-cultural influences, prefer to reject this lifestyle in favour of a predominantly law abiding way of life.

Having carried out a preliminary literature review for the research proposal I became aware of three factors that were of prime interest to me. In the first instance, Britain has a very recent academic history of examining the subject of “gang” culture per se, in fact traditionally British social scientists have focused predominantly on the study of evolving youth sub cultures; rather than the considerably more anti-social, violent and confrontational deviant youth group known today as the “street gang”. Secondly from the qualitative research that has been carried out involving disaffected working class youth, the most commonly favoured method of choice has been the use of the face to face semi structured interview schedule.

Thirdly and possibly the most important issue that became apparent is that of cultural and conflicting rift between the backgrounds of researchers and disaffected youth /“street gang” members. After completing a two year ESRC funded gang research project, Judith Aldridge has conceded, that:

Since the majority of academics, including Adridge herself, have predominantly different backgrounds from those studied, research in this particular area involving young working class people can be fraught with problems. A combination of factors such as the researcher’s age, gender and ethnicity intertwined with factors such as taste, dress and accent, can all play a critical part in gaining acceptance and building trust. Such is the cultural divide, that it is of little surprise that many communities often view researchers with wariness and most certainly as “outsiders”. (Aldridge, 2008, P.40).

Thus situated in what is an essentially alien environment, this type of researcher must rely on theoretical knowledge to interpret field observations. However since this exploratory study was to be conducted by someone whose background is uniquely rooted within a similar environment to that of the research population i.e. who lives on a former council estate on Merseyside; I felt that it may be possible to remove this obstacle of cultural rift and distrust, through an empathic understanding of interviewee discourse. Any researcher subjectivity (i.e. being too close to the background of the participants) could be monitored and kept to a minimum by the rich, diverse experience of my supervision team. To complement this I also wanted to move away from the traditional format of semi structured interview and the interviewee constriction created by what can be too much of a researcher controlled tool.

Research practicalities

The PhD research project itself is currently in the second year (2013) and has been supported by both Merseyside Police and the University of Chester where I am presently based as both a postgraduate research student and Visiting lecturer in Criminology. Currently I am in the latter stages of the data collection stage.

One of the approaches that appeared to fulfil my aims, is a method developed by social science researcher Tom Wengraf. Called Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method or BNIM, the approach seeks to explore “lived-experience” through the use of a life story format or in plain terms biographical interview. It appeared to ideally cover all of the three factors I had observed quite well. Like the research area of gang culture from a British perspective BNIM is fairly recent (Wengraf (2008:13) notes that the method “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”).

Further it fitted in with my idea of exploring the researcher and interviewer having a biographical, empathic bond of understanding and rapport building, here again Wengraf (2008:pp.23) himself has observed that “BNIM’s central focus is on understanding the subjectivity-in-situation of the person narrating part or all of their history”. Having that empathy of a similar lived experience, I felt would allow me to explore the potential origins of this subjectivity in a greater context than those researchers from different social economic backgrounds. In addition of course, all of this allowed me to add a unique methodological element to a study in a research area that is dominated by face to face semi structured interview.

Unlike the semi structured interview schedule the BNIM interview can in principle be divided into a number of up to three sub sessions that include:

1. A non-initial interpretive narrative known as sub session one. In this session the researcher asks one question known as a SQIN (Single Question Inducing Narrative) and is akin to “tell me about your life”. At this stage the researcher then remains silent and allows the participant to take control of the interview, while making notes that will form the basis of what Wengraf (2001) terms a SHEIOT (Situation-Happening-Event-Incident-Occurrence-Time).
2. In the second session, sub session two the researcher then asks questions with the direct aim of inducing discourse through PINS (Particular Incident Narratives) that is narrative based on specific situations, happenings, events, incidents, occurrences and times.
3. In a third optional session the researcher can utilise a semi structured interview schedule to obtain data on related issues that have not been covered by the participant in the previous two sub sessions.

The overall intention is to allow both the participant and to some extent the researcher greater autonomy in the interview situation. Writing for nursing times research (2002, pp.1) Kip Jones has observed “Denzin has recently proclaimed that the turn to narrative in the social sciences has been taken (Denzin 2001: 23), a fait accompli. One democratising practise within this paradigm shift is a renewed interest in biography as a method of knowing persons. He points out, "No longer does the writer-as-interviewer hide behind the question and answer format, the apparatuses of the interview machine". The interviewer, finally, has come into the light as willing participant in a dialogical process.”

With all this in mind and with the help of my three supervisors, I began to develop two questions that would form the basis for an opening “SQIN’ for both the offender and the abstainer samples. From my initial research of the existing literature around BNIM, I noted that a great proportion of studies evolved around the discipline of health and nursing studies with very little published work involving its use with young people, particularly young disaffected people.

The first drafts of the two SQUINS were similar in written format:

“In this interview I am interested in hearing about your life, specifically I would like you to tell me about your upbringing, your parents, brothers and sisters if you have any, your mates and the people you hang around with, then how you became involved with the Criminal Justice System, the Police and the courts. I won’t interrupt I will just make some notes (the SHEIOT) for some questions I will ask you about in the next session is that ok?”

The only difference with the abstainer version was instead of asking “how you became involved in the Criminal Justice System” simply enquired “Why do you think you did not become involved in the Criminal Justice System”. The next stage came with the piloting of the two SQUINS with young individuals, who met the set age criterion. It was during these sessions that it became increasingly noticeable that young people had difficulty providing unguided feed back to the question. In all of the pilot interviews participants showed an inability to manage and chronologically organise their response, the problem appeared to be coming from the fact that this was a situation that allowed individuals complete autonomy, without interference or guidance from the interviewer a condition that for most disaffected youth is quite rare if not unheard of. This observation was later reinforced by one of the participants who commented that he would feel better if he could “have an interview that was one of questions and answers”.

The Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method interview in action.

Returning to the literature review I discovered that there was a strong tradition of BNIM being used in the area of health studies with the main focus on participant’s post 25 as well as to applied issues involving interventions by social work professionals. Moreover in terms of use with marginalised younger individuals including offenders, the method was indeed still in its infancy. Writing in 2011 in a biographical case study that looked at the effectiveness of creative interventions with young offenders from a restorative justice context, Lyn Froggett, Dina Poursanidou and Alan Farrier carried out in-depth biographical interviews using BNIM as the primary method of data collection on six young people (age 11 to 18) who were frequent participant’s on a creative writing project offered by Calderdale YOT between January and April 2006.

Like me, the researchers found that participants were unable to cope with such an open ended and interviewer unguided format for which the first sub-session demands. They noted participants experiencing “difficulties with producing coherent narratives which were inevitably of varying degree linking to the young people’s individual capacities” (2011,ppXX). Not to be deterred by this setback and with further advice from my supervisors, I started to think about attempting to adapt BNIM in such a way that would yield that all important uninterrupted respondent narrative. For me the key to this was the first session, and the interpretation and delivery of the SQUIN if it was to work, it must retain the

principle of a single question, but at the same time appear comfortable enough for participants to construe and in line with their age and stage of cognitive development.

With the comments of that initial pilot participant ringing in my ears, that he would prefer a question and answer arrangement, I felt that it was still possible to use a SQUIN but in a broken down format that to the participant appeared to be as though they were responding to questions, but was in fact a single question broken into four parts. The question would incorporate four passages representing particular significant biographical events in a young participant's history that could be mentally visualised and recalled. The passages covered family, Friends and school, crime and ambition and read:

“In this interview which will be divided into two small parts I am interested in hearing about your life and where you are now. Firstly I would like you to tell me about:

Your upbringing, how you grew up, your family that is your mum, dad, sisters and brothers if you have any?

Then I would like you to tell me about your mates and the people you hang around with during your spare time. Where did you meet them and what do you do when you're with them?

Then I would like you to say something about how you became involved in the Criminal Justice System that is with the police and courts.

Finally I would like you to tell me about your ambitions and what you would like to do in the future and how you think you are going to get there?

I won't interrupt however if you wish me to repeat any parts of the question when you're ready to move on I will do. I will just make some notes for some themes I will ask you about in the next bit of the interview when you come back is that OK?”

The second SQUIN aimed at my abstainer group would be exactly the same, the only difference being that rather than ask how the participant became involved in the criminal justice system, it would probe why they think they did not become involved?

In the second sub session (SS-2) I set out the interview period (return to narrative) to the same order of family, friends and school, crime and ambition. The latter topic of ambition, I included to reassure the respondent that the interviewer was taking a genuine interest in their whole life story so far and not having some hidden agenda of being there for the extraction of certain data exclusively about their criminal activity or abstention from crime. It also allowed me to end the second session in a relaxed informal way that provided some positive foresight for the participant.

The process of the second session begins with a piece of the participants SS-1 narrative with further questions being asked around that narrative taken from the interviewer notes (what Wengraf (2001) calls the SHEIOT). Again keeping with in Wengraf's initial biographically themed framework of attempting to induce narrative of specific Situation, Happening, Event

Incident, Occasions/Occurrences and Times (SHEIOT) each question places emphasis on asking not “can you explain?”, but: “Can you recall?”, “How did that happen?”, “Can you remember?”, “Reflecting back”.

Again the focus is on bidding to induce something that is akin to what Wengraf (2001) calls Particular Incident Narratives (PINS) or enough narrative of a particular life event or experience that will enable the researcher to attempt an understanding of the participant’s subjectivity of that event. To further enhance this I also considered the importance of interview setting that is observing participants in their own location/environment. This I thought could afford me additional enriched, biographic insight into the shaping of a participants life story, as well as help me identify the possible sources of understanding of their subjective accounts. Moreover by choosing neighbourhood/locality this would also allow me to put the participant at ease and provide a good backdrop.

Performance so far:

Having used the approach on 41 participants so far I have noted that participants feel a lot more comfortable with the SS-1 format. While some accounts are still short in duration, participants now appear to be able to engage and produce good coherent narrative and do reflect back to particular situations, happenings, events, incidents, occasions and times providing enough of a life story from which an individually tailored SS2 can be developed. As Wengraf (2008) notes “if you learn how to do the Sub-session 2 unpacking, even a very short initial response can be perfectly productive”.

It is an observation that is further supported by some participants who have provided instances of a variety of many different experiences that may result in a third interview session with these particular individuals.

Summary:

While what limited research there is using the biographic narrative interview on disaffected young people does question its suitability, it is still possible for BNIM to be adapted for this particular group. To do so however researchers needs to keep in mind the following:

The key to a good biographical narrative interview with this particular group lies in the first session, and the design, interpretation and delivery of the SQUIN (the single question).

If BNIM is to work, it must retain the principle of a single question, but at the same time appear comfortable enough for participants to respond in line with their age and stage of cognitive development. Further in designing a SQUIN the researcher must also be aware of the question of freedom and respondents past experiences of lack of autonomy in face to face interaction with adults.

Also of key importance is the issue of “pushing” for specific narrative incidents. During one of the most recent interviews I came across a participant who had issues surrounding both his

sexual identity and at the same time experiences of being brought up in a violent environment both from a family perspective and socially.

I was interested in knowing more specifically about how he coped with two conflicting situations, so I began with the narrative he provided in the first session and using Wengraf's suggestions tried to push for further narrative around these topics. However after several attempts I could see my participant struggling and there was signs of anxiety of physical anxiety, at which time I decided to so stop that particular line of questioning deciding to move on to next and slightly less concerning inquiry .

However this has now made me think of the issue of how much is enough when using Wengraf's biographic narrative approach. Admittedly were interviewing young people is concerned as the present research climates show, BNIM is still in its infancy. That said I still feel that there should be an awareness of the possibility of situations like this in terms of does the researcher have the qualifications and necessary experience to deal with an immediate response that could be one of high emotion and what of the aftermath/ Potential trauma that may result in setback or indeed something more serious.

Clearly I feel the researcher must be made aware of this possibility, one suggestion could be for the researcher to have a list of organisations handy to sign post the participant to, but even so it may be the case that the participant does not immediately react and it may only sink in later and while yes the participants sign a consent form and do have a participant information sheet that says they can stop at any time, it may be too late, the researcher may have already opened that proverbial can of worms.

What I am saying is that any researcher employing biographic approaches particularly to groups like disaffected youth must be vigilant in looking for signs in body language be it facial signs or even slight changes general body posture and changes in those things using them as an indicator of just how much really is enough.

