Chapter 7

‘Could you tell me how all that happened?’
Methodological Considerations to the Life Story Interviews

Introduction
Life story interviews are a tool that enables the understanding of what was or is at stake for young women who attempt suicide, from their own perspective. In particular, since young women reported that their viewpoint was often not heard or understood by their family and the people around them, these interviews serve as a political and emancipating goal, which can open up space for their standpoint (Krikke, Nijhuis & Wesenbeek, 2000). Moreover, there is a lack of visibility of this kind of research in suicidology. By studying how women narrate about their lives, an opportunity is created to understand the processes over the life course leading young women into suicidal behavior. Notwithstanding the merits of establishing risk factors for public health purposes, the contribution or oral history is to illustrate how hitherto unexamined mechanisms and perspectives may expand the range of hypotheses and opens up new lines of inquiry into suicidal behavior.

This chapter elaborates on the rationale and methodology of conducting life stories for this research i.e. how the second research question justifies a narrative approach. Oral sources are often distrusted as truth claims to what is at stake since they are considered as biased or unreliable for explaining social problems. By first addressing these critiques of the validity, causality and epistemology of oral life story research we would like to clarify and overcome these concerns. Questions into how the memory functions and how trauma influences memory are also of crucial concern to these questions of validity and will be described next. In addition, the stories that are obtained in the research are also influenced by the strategies we employed in the selection and interaction with informants. Therefore in the final section of this chapter we will discuss these strategies and present the motives for (non) participation, the choice for location of the interviews, and the role of gender and ethnicity of the researcher. In the appendix a topic list which was used for the interviews is attached.
Rationale behind doing life story interviews

In order to explain why interviews of life stories are appropriate for answering the second research question, first it needs to be addressed what kind of information is obtained by oral evidence. Chanfrault-Duchet (1991) distinguished two features of knowledge that oral life stories offer, namely what is specific and particular in the narrative and second, the social and cultural nature in the narrative. The specific narrative in a woman’s story refers to the meaning system of the life experience until the moment of the interview, i.e. how an interviewee makes sense of what happened in her life and why this was so, how she speaks about it, how she organizes her story, what is left out, what is emphasized and the value judgments provided by her.

Next, the social nature of the self dramatized in the narrative is mostly concerned with the social status of a woman in this world, and its relations to gender and culture or ethnicity. According to Chanfrault-Duchet, for women this aspect reveals much about: ‘the condition under as well as the collective representations of women, as they have been shaped by society, with which women must deal’ (1991:77). This shows how the second research question of this project, which enquires of the intersection of ethnicity and gender, links up with the tradition of oral history. Gender and ethnicity are crucial markers for shaping the representations of women in society. In addition, comparison of the specific narrative could reveal ethno cultural versus universal patterns, and the question whether ethnic categorization makes sense.

The life story approach was chosen because it is expected to illustrate and discover the mechanisms leading young women into the suicidal process. Research in suicidology indicated that the family context usually plays an important role to suicidal behavior of youngsters (Beautrais, 1998 & 1999). Family relationships and their development as well and accompanying emotions are generally difficult to access without oral evidence (Thompson, 1981). Lastly, it is expected that the life history approach could make an original contribution to the field of suicidology since most research in this field focuses on risk factors. Since not all individuals who share risk factors demonstrate suicidal behavior, it is relevant to study the perspective of the individual i.e. why was a suicide attempt or self-harm the response to what she had lived through? Life story interviews enable to reveal this.
Validity, epistemology and causality

The contribution of oral history to knowledge production results from the insights into the social perception of facts and the social meaning that they constitute. Portelli (1991) argued that oral history does not necessarily tell us everything about events, but much more about their meaning: ‘Oral history informs us of what people wanted to do, and what they believed they were doing’ (1992:50). Rosenthal (1993) refers to this phenomenon as (re)construction: ‘the informants present us with the construction of her past and the (re)construction of the present's meanings of experiences’. Oral history is an important tool for examining feelings about the past, on the relationships between the emotions rather than the material world. It is especially through narratives that possibly contradictory emotions, of intertwined affection and anger, which are typical for intimate relationships, may become known (Thompson, 1981). In addition, life narratives illuminate the intergenerational influences in emotional patterns.

In the positivistic tradition there is often the urge to search for objective truth that can be used as universal knowledge. However, the tradition of oral history departs from another worldview. As an oral life story researcher, one does not look for a pure or unbiased version. By contrast, in the tradition of oral history, there is explicit emphasis on the partiality and contextualization of truth (Portelli, 1991). Once an informant starts her account, there is already an interpretation on her own side as well as on the side of the interviewer, since there is no such thing as unmediated language. The epistemology of oral life story research is not built on an attempt to be value free, rather what is aimed for is to realize what Harding (1991) refers to as ‘strong objectivity’. Strong objectivity is reflective of the procedures used in knowledge production, the choices made and their drawbacks, as well as honest about the role of the researcher. About the latter: the role of the interviewer in the research was undertaken with empathy and interest, accountability, engagement, and self-critical procedures, which are essential traits in a contribution to knowledge production in oral history (Ranazanoglu & Holland, 2000).

The research project aimed to get insight into the origins of suicidal behavior. However, both qualitative and quantitative research strategies struggle with the question of causality. Interview data are particularly distrusted for identifying a causal relationship since it is often argued that deeper motives are not known by individuals. According to Giddens (1984), people are able to reflect on their daily routines, which he refers to as ‘discursive and practical consciousness’, but not on their deeper motives for
infrequent behavior. While suicidal behavior falls into the latter category, following Giddens argument, it was expected that motives for suicidal behavior are difficult to obtain through direct questions (i.e. ‘Why did you become suicidal?’). In addition, according to Nevins (1996) many individuals do not always establish full self-knowledge and also deceive themselves as to their real motives and acts. Although it appears Nevins and Giddens seem to somewhat underestimate the capacity for self-knowledge, the argument that deeper motivations that guide human behavior are difficult to grasp is convincing. One way of getting around this difficulty is to not only focus on asking for motives for suicidal behavior, but rather obtaining a life story. In the childhood, youth and young adulthood of the respondent, it was expected that perspectives and emotions could be detected that are constitutive of the pathways leading into the suicidal process over time.

The search for narratives in relation to the memory
Oral history has also been critiqued in relation to how the memory works. It has been argued that life story interviews are ambiguous sources to illuminate what happened because of the fact that memory does not constitute pure recall (Lummis, 1998). The lack of chronology is another issue put forward when the presupposed defects of memory are discussed. Thompson (1981) argues that the human mind does not function according to chronological principles, but we organize our perceptions through a process of ordering. Through the process of ordering, a selection is established and the brain to a certain extent reconstructs this picked out selection. Related to the issue of selection is also that of discarding - which also arguably poses a problem for oral history.

Because of these critiques (recall, chronology, discarding) it can be doubted if memory is an adequate source for discussing one's autobiography. However, research indicated (Thompson, 1981) that the loss of memory during the first nine months is as great as that during the next thirty-four years. This means memory is not as incapable as many may think. In addition, research by Assink (2008) showed that informants who narrated their life story on several occasions over a five year time interval were substantially more consistent regarding their negative life experiences as opposed to neutral or positively evaluated experiences. Since suicidal behavior is related to negative life events, this was an important finding for the validity of the research project.

Forgetting seems also to be a lesser threat than one would assume for another reason. When interviews discuss what happened a long time ago, there is the added possibility of distortions influenced by subsequent
changes in values and norms, which could alter perceptions (Lummis, 1998; Thompson, 1981). However, these alterations are not necessarily a weakness, but rather a strength. Meaning construction, judgments as well as subjective feelings and thoughts over what happened are at the core of the strength of oral history. The mechanisms of ‘distortion’ or ‘suppression’ are found in the story that the researcher was told, this should not be considered a drawback rather it could tell us something about social values or the family psychology of the research subject.

In addition, the memory process is also influenced by interest. When a research subject is approached with social interest, need and attention by the interviewer, it increases the chances that memory will be accurate. This shows how recalling is an interactive phenomenon and will lead to specific features each time this process takes place (Thompson, 1981). Portelli (1991) explains these specific characteristics that develop as follows: ‘It is impossible to exhaust the entire memory of a single informant; the data extracted from the interview are always the result of a selection produced by a mutual relationship’ (1992:55). It is in these features that the interest and strength lies for the researcher.

By trying to get at narratives of particular incidences that happened in peoples lives, we expected to acquire understanding of meaning construction. Without knowing the particularities of events; motives and meanings may be difficult to understand (Wengraf, 2001; Rosenthal, 1993). Through having informants explain how a particular incident happened, we arrived at the foundations of their argumentations, descriptions and evaluations. Rosenthal et al. (1993) argue that it is through narratives that experiences are transmitted, whereas argumentations represent perspectives of the present. It was an important part of the interviews to disentangle experiences of events from meaning construction. Narrative pointed questions are highly beneficial to the researcher in order to move beyond a certain taken for grantedness or prejudice when listening to an informant’s assertion of a situation. Some of the techniques used to get to particular narratives rather than description or evaluation included the following questions:

- You told me about [...] Can you tell me how that all happened...?
- You said you felt [...] at that time. Can you remember a specific incident when you felt like that?
- Can you remember a particular moment when you [...]?
- Could you give me an example of when you were (disappointed, angry, ashamed) with (father, mother, brother)? (Wengraf, 2001)
Obtaining *narratives of particular incidents* also allows for a distinction to be made between memory and recall. According to Lummis (1998), memory is: ‘the fund of information about the past that an informant will readily relate. Often as polished stories or anecdotes; which suggests that they have frequently retold or thought about them’. Lummis (1998) contrasts this with recall, which he describes as: ‘responses to detailed interviewing which prompts dormant memories that are less likely to be integrated into the individual’s present value structure’ (1998). This differentiation provides an additional reason for why it is beneficial to prompt the informant for a narrative of specific incident rather than merely relying on their free flow of sentences. During the interviews we shifted back and forth between the polished stories readily available to questions about experiences stored in their minds in order to be (re)structured in the interaction.

**Interviewing and trauma**

Some of the interviewees had experienced a psycho trauma, which could refer to intimate, contradictory, shameful and painful events. These experiences may have long-lasting effects of serious psychological disturbances that impair individuals in their identity development and functioning and coping with life (Rose, 1999). Rose frames this as follows: ‘Psychotrauma survivors live not merely with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion’. Individuals with a history of suicidal behavior often have traumatic incidences in their life course. Moreover, a posttraumatic stress disorder, that may emerge in some individuals, increases the chance of suicidal behavior (Mehlum, 2005).

Interviewing individuals with psychotrauma brings into question if this can be done in a way that aims at minimizing possible psychological disturbance. Benezer (1999) identified a number of trauma signals in participants sharing their life stories, including: long silences, being unable to continue, crying, being absent minded or ‘in a different world’. The difficulty to discuss psychotrauma for individuals is also influenced by the resistance that not only themselves but also their family environment and society may have. When these signals occurred, they were attended to and responded by either changing the topic or continuing at a later time, creating silence and showing empathy.

Rose (1999) argues, speaking out about what happened also provides an opportunity for ‘naming and claiming’. By talking about the psychotrauma to people who are willing to listen, an individual reclaims feelings of compassion for herself. By constructing a narrative an attempt is
made to re-externalize the event. These factors are crucial in enabling an understanding of their experience in a new way in which negotiation of one identity can take place and ultimately, recovery may be accomplished. However, this is a process that often may take many years in a therapeutic setting. Hence the participation in a life story interview can play a modest, yet positive role in this process.

Selection procedures
We used a variety of strategies to contact women with a history of suicidal behavior. The main strategy was through the cooperation of (mental) health care professionals. If they agreed to participate they attended a presentation about the research. After one or two weeks, the professionals were asked via e-mail or phone whether they had a candidate in mind for an interview. When they had a candidate, they were asked to explain their patient what the research was about and what was expected of them. If the patient would be interested, name and phone number was registered and they were contacted for an interview.

Another important strategy we used was to advertise a link to the homepage for the research project on several websites including: maroc.nl, hababam.nl, hindustani.nl, zelfbeschadiging.nl, meiden.startpagina.nl, borderline.startpagina.nl, ggz.startpagina.nl, maghreb.nl, marocdream.nl, marokko.nl, forum.hindoestart.nl, indianfeelings.com, ex6.nl. In addition, we posted a call for assistance in the search for participants on the Dutch e-mail list Feminism as well as in the Dutch feminist magazine Opzij. In table 1, the characteristics of informants according to how they were selected are displayed.

Table 1. Selection of informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Turkish N=10</th>
<th>Moroccan N=10</th>
<th>South Asian N=13</th>
<th>Dutch N=14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self registration (internet)</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>4 (40)</td>
<td>2 (15)</td>
<td>6 (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration health care</td>
<td>8 (80)</td>
<td>5 (50)</td>
<td>9 (69)</td>
<td>8 (57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal contact/magazine</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>2 (15)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Motives for (non) participation

During the selection of participants, reasons for not participating in an interview mentioned by candidates or their health care workers were registered. Two candidates explained they did not want to dive back into their painful history, because they did not want to be confronted with disturbing memories. Often it happened that the psychologist decided for the patient that she would not be ready for an interview considering her psychological well-being at the time that they were contacted. It was then expected by the mental health care that the patient would not be ready yet to talk about psychotraumatic events, or the timing was inconvenient due to a crisis situation of the patient.

Some mental health care workers explicitly stated that they did not believe that the interview would bring anything positive to the patient, mostly since they expected that an interview could possibly do harm. We responded to this by explaining how the women interviewed so far considered an interview about their life story - despite some difficult moments - a positive chance for sharing and telling their view of what happened. Another objection a health care worker expressed was that she feared that her patient would experience an interview as a justification of suicidal behavior and encourage future suicide attempts.

Several motives were observed why informants wanted to tell their life story. Telling your life story creates meaning. Many informants wanted to contribute to improving the care for others who may become suicidal in the future by telling their own story. In addition, interviewing provides special attention from the researcher and the informants need for recognition is attended to. Attentiveness had possibly been not sufficiently available in the past. Moreover, telling from your own perspective of how it all happened implies an important shift of power balance - one that features regaining autonomy and a self image of someone who is capable of telling and directing one's own life story. Some modest effects of recovery were gained as well, since the interviews assisted to express and shape emotions that accompany the memory e.g. anger, frustration or sadness.

Location and interview context

Thompson (1981) emphasizes how the choice of location and context is important for remembering. For the research, much of what was going to be discussed was expected to refer to childhood and (family) relationships. It was hence expected that an interview in the home environment of the individual would be beneficial to sharing about these topics. The majority of the interviews were held at the informant’s home. A number of interviews
Methodological Considerations to the Life Story Interviews

were held in the mental health care institutions that informants visited for treatment. It was expected that this would also be a location where informants were accustomed to recall and reminisce as a result of their treatment. A minority of women, who did not suggest to have the interview in their home yet who were not enrolled in care were asked what would be their preference of location. These interviews were held at a café in their hometown or at the VU University. We recorded and transcribed all our interviews except one. In one case the informant did not like the idea of having her voice recorded and therefore extensive notes were made.

**Interview style, topics and format**

The interviews focused on the interpretations participants gave of their (family) history of migration, childhood, parents, upbringing, life events, family relations, suicidal behavior, abuse, ethnicity and religion. These topics were identified in previous research to be important issues in the lives of those youngsters who attempt suicide (Beautrais, 1998 & 1999). We aimed to collect a life story rather than focusing only on the event(s) of the suicidal behavior. However, since the research focused on the origins of suicidal behavior, there was more emphasis on the period before the suicidal behavior than after, and also we did zoom in extensively on the event and particularities of the suicidal acts.

The style and format we employed in the interviews was a list of topics to be covered in a mostly free-floating open interview, which stimulated self-expression. The rationale behind the topics were derived from research (including the studies we conducted, see chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5), as well as we wanted to be able to draw systematic comparisons within and between ethnic groups. By using free-floating and encouraging self-expression we aimed for nourishing the interview relationship (Thompson, 1981). Moreover, free flow expression provides the possibility to explore meaning and the construction of meaning of what happened in a woman's life.

**Confidentiality, age, gender and ethnicity of the researcher**

It was expected that due to the nature of the interview, many informants would consider confidentiality important. Therefore, it was stressed at the beginning of the interview that neither their names nor those of their family members would be used for publication. In addition, at the first interview, we noticed how a Turkish woman appeared nervous about questions about her village of origin, and about her family members' professions. Therefore
in subsequent interviews usually it was asked first if their family came from rural or urban parts of the country of origin and carefully checked if informants would be comfortable with revealing the name of the village or city. To ensure that informants would feel at ease sharing family characteristics, it was stressed that in case remarkable features would exist, slight changes to the presentation of their stories would be made.

Some immigrant communities are known for being tight-knitted. It is therefore expected that the unseen presence of outsiders may be felt (Thompson, 1981). It is imaginable that tight-knittedness of ethnic communities influences what is said and what is withheld in an interview. There were also advantages to have a researcher being an outsider to immigrant communities; there was less chance for private information would get back to acquaintances or relatives. Thompson's observation (1981) is illustrative of this: ‘the outsider more easily maintains a position of neutrality being outside the local network, and so may be spoken to in true confidentiality and with less subsequent anxiety’ (Thompson, 1981:141). To illustrate this, a South Asian candidate explicitly stated that she would only be willing to participate if the interviewer would have a majority Dutch background.

A few times it happened that women who contacted the researcher through the website explained they would be willing to participate in an interview but only online or through the telephone. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were central in this. For example, it happened that a Turkish woman explained how meeting in person would be impossible because then her family would find out. However, we felt that gaining trust as well as observing body language in face-to-face contact was essential for the research and therefore we choose not to employ online or telephone interviews.

With respect to age, most of the participants did not differ substantially from the researcher. The female researcher was in her late twenties, while the age of the informants varied between 16 and 40 years old. Similarities of age and gender seemed to soften the hierarchy of the researcher versus the informant and encouraged a feeling of mutual understanding and lower the threshold for sharing personal and intimate stories.
References


