

“Was your father a problem drinker?”

The challenges of life story interviewing in
researching adult sons of problem drinking fathers¹.

Henna Pirskanen
University of Jyväskylä, Finland
E-mail: Henna.Pirskanen@jyu.fi

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Abstract

In this article, the challenges of carrying out life story interview research on the adult sons of problem-drinking fathers will be discussed. Earlier studies have shown that parents' problem drinking can disturb family life and be harmful in various ways to children. In the case of a problem-drinking father and his son, aspects of the father-son relationship and of the father as a male role model also assume major importance. Consequently, fathers' drinking may continue to be a sensitive and a painful topic for their sons in adulthood. Moreover, several studies indicate that recruiting young men as a focus group for interview study is complicated. In addition, family matters are often perceived as something private, not to be talked about or shared with outsiders.

For these reasons the life story interview method can be problematic for the researcher interested in collecting and interpreting interview data on sons' childhood experiences. In my study, both finding interviewees, carrying out interviews on a sensitive topic and interpreting the data "truthfully" were challenging tasks presenting a number of ethical considerations. The data used in the study consist of 21 life story interviews with young Finnish men aged 21-42. While these young men were growing up, their fathers were problem drinkers. In the interviews the young men produced narratives or stories about their lives from an adult perspective. Thus narrative analysis is suggested to be applied in analysing the interviews.

Introduction

Storytelling has been said to serve an essential function in human life. It forms an important part of human communication, because we think, speak and give meanings in story form. Given this, it is no surprise that in academia narrative, life history and ethnographic approaches have become a burgeoning field among others in social sciences. The use of life narratives in academic study can be traced all the way back to Freud and his applying of psychoanalytic theory to individual lives. (Atkinson 1998, 1-3.) Today, the life story has evolved into a qualitative research method for gathering information on the essence of a person's entire life – a method of looking-at-life-as-a-whole and carrying out an in-depth study of individual lives (Cohler 1988; Atkinson 1998, 3).

Interviewing on the whole life course tempts informants to give away stories, narratives about life. In turn, a quest for narrative form can be a conscious methodological decision from the part of view of the researcher who might encourage the informant to follow the lines of narrative interview. In both cases, among others the limits of remembering and the effects of the informants' narrative work have influence on the data the researcher obtains from the field (see e.g. Kohler-Riessman 2005).

In this article, the challenges of carrying out life story interview research on the adult sons of problem-drinking fathers will be discussed. The data, 21 life story interviews, was collected from 21-42-year-old young men. Life story interviewing gives the informants a possibility to reflect profoundly on both their own and their fathers' lives and to give meanings to their childhood. Thus, several intriguing ethical and methodological problems, challenges and considerations are attached to doing research on sons' experiences of parental problem drinking and on their childhood memories. Critical points or problems when applying the life story interview as a method in this kind of sensitive issue are 1) finding interviewees 2) the course of the interviews 3) interpretation and worth of the data. Each critical point will be discussed in more detail in the article.

The article first foregrounds some methodological aspects on life story interviewing, narratives and sociology of memory, since remembering the past entails certain crucial

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points to consider. Next, the background and data of the study on adult sons of drinking fathers will be introduced. Subsequently, obstacles and dilemmas of the study in hand are addressed, followed by a short afterword at the end.

Linkages of the life story method, sociology of memory and narrative practices

In biographical interviews informants reflect back to the past and tell about their lives, whilst at the same time they do both memory work and create narratives. The very act of memory work implies fragmentariness though it strives to express continuity and purpose in life. (Čermák & Chrz 2005, 49; Vilkkö 1997, 19.) Coherence and continuity can appear in a story of an individual whose life is not coherent at all (Čermák 2004, 212). Consequently, life story interviewing inevitably entails questions about the nature of remembering and memory.

Holstein and Gubrium (2007, 345-346) explain that peculiarly, life histories and biographical work differentially highlight or arrange particulars in a person's experience and in the process thus orient that person both backward and forward in time. Life courses are both retrospective constructions and constructions for the moment. Therefore life story constructions, memory and narrating are inevitably tied to together in the life story interview process. Similarly, in sociological theory these linkages are evident and are often inseparable in theorising on any one of the mentioned. In the context of this article, it is impossible to give a thorough treatment on the history and current theorising or conceptual thought on life story interviewing, sociology of memory² and narrative approaches, but some central ideas of the linkages just mentioned are introduced in order to highlight some methodological and theoretical background assumptions of the study.

Most importantly, a conceptualisation on what is meant by memory in the context of life story interviewing is needed; memory, in a narrow sense, is today taken to mean "the human faculty of preserving certain traces of past experiences and having access to these - at least in part - through recall" (Jedlowski 2001, 29). French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced during the 1920s–1940s into sociology of memory the system of thought according to which memories of each individual are inscribed within social frameworks of memories that are reproduced through language and discourse (Korkiakangas 2006, 126). Inspired by Halbwachs and later theorists, in contemporary thought past is understood never to remain one and the same, but rather selected, filtered and restructured both at individual and social levels. Therefore a life story is not stable, but it develops and changes throughout time (Čermák 2004, 213; Saastamoinen 2000). In other words, the present shapes the past. Sociology's interest in memory derives most of all from the recognition of the temporal dimension in human life: continuities and discontinuities of social life imply mechanisms of recalling and forgetting, selecting and processing things left in the past. Modernity and its social constellation in which traditions lose their value and discontinuities are generated, but on the other hand more sophisticated technical instruments exteriorise the human faculty of recall, create a peculiar ground for social scientists to pay attention to individual³ memory in contemporary society (Jedlowski 2001, 30).

Consequently, memories are very subjective and tied to the moment when they are told (see Bochner 2007). But, even individual memory has in addition always a social dimension,

². For example the very concept of memory went through changes in the course of the 20th century from the model dating back to St. Augustine of memory as a "store", to memory as a plurality of interrelated functions (see Olney 1998; Jedlowski 2001, 30).

³. And even more so to pay attention to collective memory, i.e. a set of social representations concerning the past which each group produces and institutionalises (see Jedlowski 2001, 32).

since individuals' membership in social circles has an effect on his discursive practises. In addition, narrated recollections are organised around temporal references provided by the social context; and, narrative mechanisms are culturally and socially mediated. Memory manifests in narrative practises which are used in different social contexts and especially in biographical interviews or in autobiographical accounts. (Jedlowski 2001, 30-32.)

Typically, a methodological problem that sociologists of memory have been interested in is the one that appears in empirical research: the reliability or the truth of what individuals claim to recall. The stance towards "wrongly" remembered memories and altogether questioning the limitations of memory in certain kinds of situations are examples of this (see Fingerroos & Haanpää 2006; Velleman & Orford 1993). This is where we circle back to narrating.

Manifestation of memory in narratives is more than logical, since whereas recalling is highly selective and full of producing memories anew, so is narrating (see Saastamoinen 2000). Kohler-Riessman (2005) states that in producing narrative, events are selected, organised, connected and evaluated as meaningful for the audience. Sequence and consequence that follow from selection and the organising process are what make diverse texts narrative. She also explains that the "narrative turn" that took place in human sciences, together with the memoir boom in literature and popular culture, identity politics and the current therapeutic culture, worked as catalysts of research interest in narrative. In the tradition of sociology and psychology, personal narratives may encompass lengthy sections of talk, extended accounts of lives, in which the life story element of the narrative is highlighted. (See also Bamberg 2006.)

One more remark should be made before moving on to describe the data and the method in the study this article is based on. A distinction between a life story (i.e. the account that an individual gives of his life), and a life history (i.e. the 'objective' reconstruction of the life from materials and testimonies external to individual memory), is essential in that life story interview relies on those personal accounts rather than offering factual truths or testimonies about an individual's life history. (Johansson 2005, 222; Jedlowski 2001.) Relying on personal accounts entails among others questions about the reliability of memory and the worth of the memorised narratives as data. These are important aspects in any narrative research, and I return to them at later stages of the article.

Research background and method

Until recently, men were by far the largest consumers of alcohol in Finnish society. It can be argued that, up until the last three decades, when the use of alcohol by women has increasingly began to resemble that of men, Finnish alcohol culture was a "manly" domain of life (Holmila 2001). Thus, although the number of female problem drinkers is increasing, this category has so far mostly comprised men. Despite the fact that male problem drinkers often had and continue to have families with children, gender-specific research on the connections between fatherhood, masculinity and drinking has rarely been carried out. For example, the experiences of the same sex child, the son, of his father's drinking remain largely unexplored. The aim in my study is to help fill this gap in the family research field. The research questions are:

- 1) What kind of relationship exists between a son and his alcohol-abusing father? How has the father's excessive use of alcohol affected their relations?
- 2) How does the son of a problem-drinking father perceive his father's masculinity and fatherhood? In what ways is power related to these perceptions?

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Earlier studies have shown that parental problem drinking can disturb family life and be harmful in various ways to children (see e.g. Ackerman 1992; Itäpuisto 2005). For example in the study by Velleman and Orford (1993, 39), children of problem drinkers described feelings of worry and insecurity, experiencing instability in the family, and arguments and quarrels at home. In the case of a problem drinking father and his son, aspects of the father-son relationship and of the father as a male role model also assume major importance. In recent research on fatherhood, the relationship between fathers and sons has increasingly come under the spotlight.

For example Perälä-Littunen (2004, 108–129) noted that generally boys expect the father to be a male role model to his son. Her interviewees also thought that boys should have a closer relationship with their father than with their mother. Itäpuisto and Grönfors (2004, 141–145) studied stories submitted to the Finnish “Childhood of Glass” –writing competition and found that boys in several cases saw their drinking fathers as missing, absent fathers.

In order to cover the sons’ perceptions and experiences of their fathers’ problem drinking during their childhood, youth and present day, my study is based on a qualitative life story interview research. As mentioned, the data used in the study consist of 21 life story interviews with Finnish young men aged 21–42. These young men all had a problem-drinking father while they were growing up. The interviews carried out varied in length from one to three hours. During the interviews, I let the interviewees talk as freely as possible. Consequently, several of the interviewees gave long answers and pondered at length the questions that I posed them. In many cases the interviewees themselves constructed story-like accounts of their childhood, and therefore an interview format with no tightly structured questions proved to be appropriate for the purpose. In the interviews the young men talked about their lives and childhood from an adult perspective.

The life line -method⁴ was used to illustrate the interviewees’ biography to date. The interviewees were asked to draw a line on paper expressing how they felt at significant moments in their lives. This was a helpful tool for me as a researcher as it enabled me to piece together the sons’ lives. The life line technique has proved to be practical when, for example, conducting interviews on working class male drinkers. The line drawn on the paper illustrates the rise and fall in the mood during significant life events. Thus the respondent creates a synopsis of his life course which reflects the life story that he has in mind. (Alasuutari 1986, 12, 17.) The life line –method could be assessed to represent something in-between Jedlowski’s (2001) distinction between life story and life history. The informants create personal accounts of their lives drawn on the paper, but in a sense these accounts containing important ages, dates, events and other ‘factual’ information along the life line have features of ‘life history’.

Dilemmas, dilemmas? Overcoming obstacles in life story interview research

Fathers’ drinking may continue to be a sensitive, even painful, topic for their sons in adulthood. Moreover, several studies indicate that recruiting young men, even men in general, as a focus group for interview study can be complicated (see e.g. Butera 2006). In addition, family matters are often perceived as something private, not to be talked about or shared with outsiders (Smart 2006, 155).

⁴. In Finnish research the life line technique is often used as a tool in interviews and as a method of group working. Life line may help the interviewee to frame and to construct his own life story. (See e.g. Koski-Jännes et al. 1998.)

These are some examples of why the life story interview method can be problematic for the researcher interested in collecting and interpreting interview data on sons' childhood experiences. In my study, both 1) finding interviewees and carrying out interviews on a sensitive topic and 2) interpreting the data "truthfully", are challenging tasks which also raise ethical considerations. Below, I discuss these research problems in more detail.

Locating interviewees

The topic of my interviews – a father's excessive drinking and his fatherhood - was to some extent a sensitive issue. The degree of sensitivity in each case varied according to the quality of individuals' childhood experiences. For example, if there had been violence in the family or the father had died as a result of drinking, his son's memories might still be painful. Possibly, in part, for this reason I had difficulties in finding interviewees despite advertising for interviewees in regional newspapers across the country. Originally I planned on seeking respondents through the "snowball" process, that is, by locating respondents through networks of people, who would in turn inform their networks about my research. Thus locating of interviewees starts with contacting acquaintances who then go on to contact their acquaintances that are unknown to the researcher (Warren 2005, 87). This technique proved to be inefficient, however, as it resulted in only three participants.

In several studies it has been noted that young men are often reluctant to participate in research and are therefore a complex focus group for interview purposes. When, in addition, the interview topic itself is stigmatising or sensitive, or when the occurrence of target respondents is rare in the population, seeking respondents may be especially difficult. (Warren 2005, 87–88; see Butera 2006; Itäpuisto 2005.) According to Renzetti and Lee (1993), participants may feel threatened by participating in research when it intrudes into the private sphere or delves into personal experience. For example Velleman and Orford (1990, 299) in their study of children with problem drinking parents found access to the target interview group, 21-35- year old men, to be a problem.

These earlier studies help to explain why each of my newspaper announcements typically yielded only one to four respondents willing to participate in the study. In other words, a researcher interested in carrying out interviews on a sensitive topic among a not easily accessible focus group has to have patience. It may take time and effort before all the interviews are completed. In my case, some cancellations also took place, or in some cases the interviewees just did not show up and never responded to my calls after this. As the last interviews approached, I began to notice feeling nervous before meeting a respondent. This was not on account of the interview itself, but because I was not sure whether the interviewee would arrive as planned.

Carrying out interviews – empathy and neutrality

Due to the nature of the interview topic, I also considered it important to take into account the emotions and stress that may rise to the surface during the course of the interview; on the ethical level it is the researcher's duty to ensure that the potential risks and distress that may be part of the interview are kept to the minimum (Lee 1993; Warren 2005, 88–89). It is possible that the respondent may have adopted a new self image since the events in question. However, in the interview he is confronted with those past events and the self that he may have buried. From this perspective the interviewer is a person who is 'forcing' the respondent to face a perhaps highly unpleasant life history. (Warren 2005, 89.) In addition, Butera (2006, 1272) suggests that as part of doing masculinity, men may want to keep certain aspects of the self locked away from the public gaze – including that of the researcher's. I thus had to be aware of the emotions that my questions might arouse and

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formulate those questions discreetly. The interviewees also needed an opportunity to avoid answering an uncomfortable question. Ethical considerations of this kind have to be taken into account and the participant informed that answering a question is voluntary.

Another challenge with ethical connotations when conducting interviews is not only establishing rapport and showing empathy - which are basic instructions for interview researchers in handbooks on qualitative research (see e.g. Fontana & Prokos 2007) - but also maintaining the boundaries between an interview and 'therapy'. In everyday talk, building rapport can be done by sharing experiences and by showing empathy. In the interview situation the purpose of talk is, ultimately, getting the needed information from the respondent and hence, showing empathy may be an effective means to achieve this. (see Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005, 41-42.) But, beyond this "getting-information-out-of-the-informant" - goal, empathy is, more profoundly, also the act of understanding, offering the possibility of understanding others across space, time and differences in experience (Shuman 2006, 152).

However, in showing empathy the researcher is confronted with the challenge of maintaining the boundaries between roles, since as an interviewer she or he is required to remain neutral and to avoid turning the interview into a therapy session (see Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2005, 41-42). Neutrality means that the researcher minimises her comments, does not voice her own opinions and remains objective.

In retrospect, my perhaps traditional structured interviewing approach, which emphasises neutrality and in which the researcher hopes that nothing in the interview is left to chance, might not have been needed (Fontana & Prokos 2007, 21). During the interviews I was trying not to comment on the experiences and memories the respondents told me. For example, when the men talked about the negative emotions that the father's drinking had caused and about their painful childhood memories, I felt that I had to perform a delicate balancing act to maintain my role as a researcher and the requirement of neutrality attached to it. In other words, keeping up this neutral role to some extent restricted my possibilities of showing empathy so as not to cross the boundary and become merely an empathetic fellow listener or a therapist. I tried my best not to express my opinions and not take sides and was wary, for example, about showing overt pity.

Ruusuvuori and Tiittula (2005, 50-51) in turn argue that an interviewee may explicitly expect empathy from the researcher on account of his harsh experiences; emotion work is required thus not only from the person doing memory work, but also from the person carrying out interviews. Unwillingness to show compassion, passivity and inert responding on the part of the researcher can be interpreted as lack of interest, which does not encourage interaction or induce the respondent to share confidential experiences. Therefore I tried to compromise between these extremes by nodding, by agreeing with utterances and by asking additional questions on the topics the respondent clearly wished to talk more about - in short, by expressing interest in the respondent's story. One might term the kind of respectful listening as 'active listening' (Johansson 2005, 256).

Despite these cautious efforts, some of the interviewees said at the end that the interview had been 'therapeutic'. I assume, however, that by this comment they were referring to the fact that, as they themselves mentioned, they might not previously have anyone to talk to in detail about their childhood experiences and about the emotions connected with them. Though each of them had at some level discussed their father's drinking with their partner, siblings or mother, only some had really shared the thoughts they had about their fathers' fatherhood, the meanings they attached to their fathers and the effects of their father's drinking on their lives as a whole. Trying to describe events and experiences never before vocalised can thus be challenging (Fraser 2004, 189).

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Despite the potentially difficult topic of the interviews, in most cases the interview atmosphere was surprisingly relaxed and easy. Some respondents joked or told funny anecdotes about their fathers. Naturally there were also times when they turned very serious, and from time to time it was difficult and challenging for them to speak about painful matters.

Jähi (2004, 75) notes that a story containing hard and distressing life events might not necessarily be experienced as distressing by the researcher in cases where the interviewee himself has accepted what has happened in his past. On the other hand, there are occasions when the respondent is in the throes of processing his life and his past, struggling with accepting it, and therefore the interview is abundant in emotional feelings. In addition, disclosure of personal information can be hard to listen to, especially to people unused to doing so. In these cases even a 'mild' story may be experienced as difficult by the researcher. (Fraser 2004, 188; Lumme-Sandt 2005, 139.) I have since considered whether I made partly unconscious efforts to lighten and relax the atmosphere of the interview. Is it possible that my own conduct during interviews prevented respondents from talking about the serious issues they might have preferred to talk about?

In any case, the interviews themselves might reflect the existence of 'the interview society' (Silverman 1997; Holstein & Gubrium 2007) - the interview format that permeates society today and with which citizens have become acquainted in numerous everyday life situations and in the media. In other words, the respondents knew what was expected of them in the situation, and, consequently, were able to adjust their story to fit into an interview format. (Fontana & Prokos 2007, 12; Silverman 1997.)

Biographical interview data under scrutiny – interpreting life stories

Besides the problems of finding interviewees and carrying out interviews, another challenge in life story research is interpreting biographical interview data truthfully. This raises both 1) the question of whether life stories or childhood memories can be considered as hard facts in themselves and 'true' in this sense, and 2) the question of how to interpret data in a fashion that is truthful or faithful to the interviewees' original stories.

Dilemmas of memory

Particularly issue 1) above is intertwined with the question of the individual's memory (see e.g. Bochner 2007). Some of the dilemmas of memory will be illustrated next with quotations from the interview data.

To start with, in some cases the sons were unable to remember things from the past:

R⁵: How would you describe the kind of childhood you had? How much do you remember?

I: No, I don't remember much at all. When I look at photos and such like, playing with friends and stuff, but I haven't... before six or seven years of age, I cannot really (remember). (Interviewee 5, 28 years)

R: Did it (drinking) change with time?

I: Yes, well, it changed in a way, I try to remember, straight away, because I don't have such memories. One reason why I wanted to do this (participate in the interview) was that for a long time it was like I wasn't able to remember anything from the past, and now that I have started this psychotherapy-thing as well, I have got back some recollections. (Interviewee 18, 34 years)

⁵. R = Researcher, I = Interviewee.

R: What do you remember about the time before the (parents') divorce, and do you have any ideas about it (drinking)?

I: About it, I don't have any ideas, I don't remember anything about those days, week days or such (when dad drank), can't remember, can't say. It was during the week too. I know that, but I don't remember it. (Interviewee 16, 21 years)

The respondents admitted not remembering certain events from the past. In the first quotation the interviewee recalls that he has seen childhood photos, but cannot remember things himself. Bates (2002, 155-157) argues that memory is tightly connected with vision, and even though memories may recede over time, they may be refreshed by using photographs. Every time when photos as objects, as carriers of memories, are seen, memories are revised and updated. The second interviewee explains that for a long time he did not remember anything, but lately in psychotherapy he has started to 'get back' those memories. Psychotherapy has served as a technique, a tool for recovering memories. The third interviewee states that he knows something about his father's drinking but cannot remember it.

Talk about 'knowing' something indicates that things that other people have said may have affected the informants' 'authentic' memories:

R: But he wasn't drinking at this time [shows a spot on the life line paper] yet, in your early childhood?

I: At least I don't remember, I don't have any recollections of that. Mum told me that the drinking started - they had been married for a year when I was born [...] I remember what I was told, I have heard more from dad - I haven't talked too much with mum - but more from dad about mum feeling bad about his drinking. And I can't remember dad being bad towards us. (Interviewee 2, 26 year)

R: Do you have any perception on what kind of a man other people thought he was?

I: Well, at the funeral I talked to some of his friends he had known for twenty years or so. They told all kinds of fun stories about fishing and suchlike, and it sounded like another, like a strange person to me. I suppose that with friends and old acquaintances he was different (than at home).

R: In what way?

I: Perhaps more open, sociable, talkative. Of course this is hearsay, fishing stories and others. And on the basis of what I have heard about his youth, these adventures with women and stuff, I can't comprehend that it was the same person. (Interviewee 21, 28 years)

Mothers, siblings or other close people may have affected the content of the stories that sons told me about their fathers. Goodall (2005, 492) has used the term narrative inheritance to describe the kinds of stories given to children by and about family members. Memories shared here are not only personal narratives, but multi-voiced, and perhaps in some sense collective or social narratives. The shared narrative is thus larger than personal, including and drawing on the memories of family members, friends and acquaintances (See Shuman 2006, 148-149).

In particular, when I asked sons about their childhood and fathers' drinking in the distant past, sons resorted to stories told by other people in order to make their own story coherent and neat. The quest for coherence in telling about experiences across the life course is typical for the individual's own meaning-making process (Fiese & Sameroff 1999).

Selecting, ordering and processing, which are part of the narrative practise, serve the aim for coherence. On the other hand, on some occasions stories told to interviewees by others contradicted the overall view that sons had formed of their fathers. For example the 28-year old son in the second quote was confused over hearing at his father's funeral that his father had possessed characteristics that he was entirely unaware of. The unexpected account about the father had to some extent broken the coherence of the son's inner story of his father.

The interviewees also were aware of the changes in perceptions or feelings that they had once had:

R: Did you think that your dad was present?

I: No-o, that is what I recognise, when I remember dad's expressions or looks when we were doing something together. I've now realised that he probably wasn't at all present then, because I've realised that I sometimes do the same thing when I'm playing with my son; that I carry on playing, but at the same time keep thinking, "when will this (game) end". (Interviewee 18, 34 year)

R: How about nowadays, what do you think of him?

I: Nowadays my feelings are quite neutral, I don't hate or love him. [...] When he got cancer [...] it was terrible and I had a bad conscience because I had hated him and then I thought that I'll forgive him. It was hard. But later on I understood that I don't need to have a bad conscience about it. I still had to deal with those feelings of hatred though, give my self permission to feel them. (Interviewee 9, 37 years)

R: Did your mum, by the way, begin to drink along with your father? Was there that kind of a pattern?

I: Yes, there was a sort of pattern; I believe that it was partly so that dad tried to manipulate me, sometimes, when he was drunk, by saying that 'She's drinking again, she's a bad person'.

R: Your mum?

I: Yeah, (to make me believe) that she's bad and terrible. Maybe I have now, only lately, realised that it wasn't so, though back then I didn't think that way. That she's not like that. But instead he (dad) himself is just like that. (Interviewee 19, 33 year)

Sons' perceptions of various things related to a father and his drinking might have altered during the life course. New realisations might have occurred only in the son's adulthood. For example life transitions, turning another page in the life script, can make individuals re-interpret their experiences and perceptions (Horrocks, Milnes, Roberts & Robinson 2002). In the first quote, after becoming a father himself the 34-year-old son says that while playing with his child, he is sometimes deep away in his own thoughts. He noticed the resemblance with his father when he realised that his father had actually behaved in the same manner, i.e. he was not present to his children. In the second extract the son's emotions towards and thoughts about his father had altered after the latter got cancer and passed away. In the third extract it was not until adulthood that the son perceived how his father had tried to manipulate him against his mother.

To summarise, first, sons in their adulthood may not remember some events at all, or they may accidentally recall things in the distant past 'incorrectly'. Alternatively, their interpretations of past events may be modified by other people or in the light of more recent incidents in life - earlier in life they might have given a different account of a certain event. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2007, 345-346) life histories and biographical work

may be subject to reconstruction depending on what might happen next. Hence, the life course itself is always provisional and contingent on the biographical work involved. The content of the accounts shared in life story interviews are inevitably affected by biographical work of the interviewee and dependent on his current construction of life events.

Secondly, sons might have personal motives for interpreting certain incidents in a certain way, which might differ from the 'objective' course of events. For example, they might want to construct a certain kind of 'self' during the interview: to tell something about themselves and their identities. In Goffman's (1959) words, they might want to put forward a presentation of self that they consider appropriate for the situation. Or further still, they might innocently formulate details in their account to fit better into the plot of their story. From an epistemic point of view, knowledge generated in life story interviews can be argued to be knowledge from the past and not necessarily knowledge about the past. As time passes, people rethink, redescribe, and even refeel the past as part of their ongoing sense-making efforts. Accordingly, stories can be just as tenably denoted to be told by looking back to and reflecting past. When people tell their stories, they have arrived at a conclusion about the past, some small truth that they want to establish about past events. (Bochner 2007, 203.) Establishing a certain truth, based on certain personal or social motives, is in other words part of the story making process.

Memory work, truth and narratives constructed & reconstructed

Despite what is written above, how real is the dilemma of truth in relation to memory when the sons talk about their recollections of their childhood and youth? How far can I analyse or make sense of this data in relation to the question of 'truth' in the strict sense?

I have already brought forth Bochner's (2007) account that memories are very subjective and tied to the moment when they are told. Are, then, these stories 'reliable' accounts of life histories? Partly in order to overcome this dilemma involving memory and subjective interpretations, I have applied the methodological solution of handling the data collected on sons' experiences as narratives. As they remember their childhood during the interviews, the interviewees create narratives, stories, about their lives and experiences. In other words the format of the interview tempts the respondents to tell about their lives in narrative form. In addition, given the dynamic nature of individual memory, sons observe their childhood memories from an adult perspective and attach meanings, given later in life, to these experiences (see Korhonen 1999). Consequently, in my work I apply Jackson's (1998, 49) idea according to which experiences are reflexive and at the same time narrative constructions, while narratives, in turn, are socially situated and moulded.

I also want to emphasise that although the respondents cannot remember every detail from the past when telling their life stories, this does not mean that they are unreliable interviewees. Neither does it mean that the data of a life story interview have less value as sources of information. Rather, story telling is a logical way of understanding one's life history. For example, in Smart's interview study on the lives of children post-divorce, story telling was a tool for children to make sense of their past experiences. (Smart 2006, 167–168.) Alasuutari has noted that life stories are a rich form of data because people not only share experiences during the life course but also explain and justify the decisions and choices they have made. A special feature of life stories is that people do not necessarily remember everything, and from among the things they remember they have to choose the most essential ones to disclose to the interviewer in order for the interview not to take too long. (Alasuutari 1986, 8–10.) On the other hand, Velleman and Orford (1993, 54–55) have also questioned the limits of memory. They state that certain kinds of memories do not vanish, or diminish in significance, over time. According to them children of problem

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drinking parents are able even after twenty or thirty years to clearly memorise and describe experiences and feelings they had in childhood.

In any case, life-story accounts are by no means arbitrary or haphazard stories from the past. According, for example, to Holstein and Gubrium (2007), although life course constructions are built in the interviews, and people may author their own biographies, they do not do so at random. Rather, the biographies that people construct are familiar in the sense that they are built on culturally shared commonsense categories and ideas. For instance, how the interviewees characterise their experiences reflects culturally shared interpretive orientations and goals. In biographical work representations of the life course are purposefully assembled and transformed in the meaning-making process. In addition, even though what has not been remembered, or what has been left out, is an important aspect in considering the “truthfulness” of the data, the researcher might get further by rather analysing what is really there in the data. In addition, narrative analysis serves an opportunity to analyse the form and the function of the stories, rather than merely concentrating on the content - or the missing content - of the young men’s memories.

Fingerroos and Haanpää (2006, 32-33) note that “wrongly” remembered memories are often considered as less valuable source of information as compared to knowledge obtained from, say, (historical) documents. The goal of for example life story interviewing, however, is not primarily to distinguish between “wrong” and “right” recall and information. Rather, the usage of memories and recall in research is demanding just because they might reveal less of the factual events of the past, but more of the meanings of the events to the informant as well as of their importance more broadly speaking (see also Portelli 2002).

Accordingly, Bochner (2007, 199-200) has made a distinction between 1) memory work and 2) story-making work in writing autoethnographies. This distinction can be applied in life-course interviewing as well. The respondents both do memory work while they remember happenings from the past, and do story-making work while they tell about what happened, i.e. how they retell or recount the past. They are engaged in the active remaking of the past, transforming then to now. What they remember is like the product of an archaeological dig, a trace of the past always in need of interpretation. Bochner (2007, 205-206) concludes that in many respects it is better to think of memory as a perspective or point of view. Memory is not like a video recording of events and feelings – perhaps remembering is actually akin to narrating. Memory never provides unmediated access to the past as it was – it is a form of mediation, of rewriting, revising, remembering and recounting, including in the case of sons of drinking fathers.

As a researcher, I too am faced with the challenge of remaining true to the original stories told by respondents. For example in my data, one of the interviewees emphasised from the beginning that his father was a really good father despite drinking and that he did everything expected of a father. However, later in the interview he came to reveal that he did not really spend time with dad, they hardly did anything together and when he visited his dad (his parents were divorced), his dad was often drunk or had passed out. He admitted that he wished he had had a closer relationship with dad while growing up. Should I as a researcher interpret this piece of information as “the good father” story, because the interviewee insisted that his father was a good father? Or should I in this case be unfaithful to the respondent’s expression, his “truth” on the father, and interpret the interview as an example of a son missing his absent father? The latter option contradicts with what the respondent seems to want to tell about his father – interpreting the piece of data differently breaks with and is contrary to this message the son wants to deliver. For a researcher, however, the latter interpretation seems a more obvious and rational option in analysing the story.

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The above example illustrates some individual cases in which a researcher is faced with problems in being faithful to the data. In most of the cases in my analysis, however, respondents' interpretations of the past interact with the researcher's interpretations of these narratives. After all, the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations, rather than facts or laws, from interviewees' talk. An interview, inevitably, is a highly interactive situation in which the researcher's aim is to understand the meaning of the interviewees' experiences and life worlds. (Warren 2005, 83; Holstein & Gubrium 1995.) During an interview, the respondent may take diverse standpoints and may shift from one to another, say from the perspective of a former child to that of a present father or a caregiver. In this respect, perspectives are situational and shape the course of the interview (Warren 2005, 84). As mentioned, perspectives are also social, since they are moulded by stories told to respondents by other people.

This variety of interpretations and perspectives that are open to the respondent can be seen as richness rather than an obstacle in analysing interview data. It may be concluded that the results of analysing interview data are in fact a co-production of the multiple perspectives and the social sphere of the narrator in the interview, and the researcher's perspective. These mixed and intertwined co-products, co-narratives, are interpreted and re-interpreted in the process of data gathering and analysis. The challenge to be faithful to the respondents' stories may to some extent even become blurred or unimportant amongst the diversity of perspectives, co-products and re-interpretations, and the multiplicity of narratives. Fraser (2004, 195) has concluded that rather than hoping to produce the "right" knowledge or the "truth", narrative researchers acknowledge that there are multiple possibilities for representing stories – narrative truths (Čermák 2004, 213). Therefore pretending that the researcher's influence could be excluded from the interpretation process has been questioned by e.g. Fontana and Prokos (2007, 72-75). Nevertheless, in interpreting data the researcher has to have respect for the original life stories, even though she does not need to take everything and every opinion expressed by the interviewees for granted.

Finally

I wanted in this paper to illustrate and discuss some of the methodological dilemmas and possible obstacles that a researcher may encounter when life story interviewing young men on a sensitive topic and on past events, in this case the adult sons of problem drinking fathers. Finding interviewees and carrying out interviews poses, as stated earlier, one such possible challenge. Finding respondents may be time-consuming and, when interviewees are finally found, one has to be prepared for no-shows. During interviews the researcher has to decide whether to temper sympathy towards the emotions awakened in the respondents with neutrality to keep a balance in order to maintain the boundary between the roles of a researcher and a therapist.

After completing the data collection, another challenge lies ahead in the form of analysing the life story interview data. The researcher has to deliberate what the relation of the life stories is to individual (or social) memory. How does the researcher remain faithful to respondents' stories in the analysis? These methodological challenges that may arise from the nature of the life story interview method can be approached, as mentioned above, by analysing interviews as narratives, co-produced by the respondent and the interviewer. Narratives allow for gaps in memory, subjective memories, re-interpretation of events later in life and the multiple perspectives taken by the narrator (Craib 2006, 10).

Biographical work, including memory work and story-making work (Bochner 2007; Holstein & Gubrium 2007) is never haphazard but both the stories themselves and interpretations of them are constructed according to categories and ideas that are culturally shared by

the respondent and the researcher. Greene and Hill (2005, 8) argue that, inevitably, the researcher will be led to interpret, for example, childhood stories from the perspective of the prevailing cultural childhood ideology. This means that in our culture we have perceptions of what 'good' childhood entails according to the prevailing ideology, and of how well the interviewees' stories match those requirements. Therefore interviewees and the researcher in most cases probably tacitly agree on these perceptions.

In more intricate cases, the researcher needs to consider separately and according to her best judgment the most appropriate interpretation of an individual story. Perhaps one cornerstone in responding to the methodological challenges discussed in this article - present in my research, as in many other studies - is reflexivity in understanding the challenging standpoints taken by the interviewee in telling his stories and, in relating them to the interpretations the researcher arrives at. By this I mean reflexivity in understanding the nature of narratives: Kohler-Riessman's (2005, 6) observation that "truths" of narratives are rather in the shifting connections they forge among past, present and future, than in faithful accounts of the past world, is more than insightful in this connection. Hence, narratives are not strict records of past events, but certain kinds of accounts, constructions of past, produced with certain motives and social dimensions. Past manifests itself in differing shapes and places (Fingerroos & Haanpää 2006) – but argumentation on how we discuss it and represent it in research has to be done with reflection.

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