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Personal Narratives as a Research Method in Folklore

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For most folklorists, life histories are considered as one of the principal means of obtaining data about the social world. The paper will examine the various manipulations of the transcribed narratives and question the objectivity of such a method. A shift in perspectives will be proposed by considering personal narratives as fieldwork narrative events. The consequences in orientation are reflected on the aims of the research itself. Aims other than collecting data will be suggested.

The narrative of personal experience is largely considered to be an account of the event, based on the verifiable facts of a life history. The person who is telling or writing the story claims to have been originally involved in the events, which are then naturally assumed to have really happened. These assumptions have led many scholars to focus their interest on the point of view from which the event is told. It is thought to be that of the narrator and his participation in the reported event (Labov 1972:359-360).

The issue has been discussed with regard to a wide range of oral stories told in the first person. In folklore, a great diversity of narrative forms within the category of personal narrative have been "discovered" in our everyday communication. Memorabile (Sirowatka 1961 according to Stulli 1984), true stories (Dobos 1978), memorate and fabulate (Degh 1974), stories about life (Stulli 1984), local anecdotes, practical jokes and tall stories (Bauman 1981 and 1986), rural diaries (Motz 1987) and family anecdotes or reminiscences (personalore) (Dolby-Stahl 1985) have been analyzed under the influence of semiotics and literary theory.

On the one hand, the expression of traditional values and cultural symbols have been recognized in the examples of private folklore. Besides collecting, experts in oral literature have proved competence in passing through the text to its deeper narrative levels, directing the analysis via the reconstruction of social and cultural patterning. Autobiographies, diaries, intimate letters and life histories are placed into the category of "personal documents". Scholars are given scientific grounds to take such accounts for verbal forms that throw light on the individual and the social world (Oring, 1987). Thus, the stories told as "personal experience" are found precious data for their *natural* way of mediating social values.

On the other hand, those analyses significantly influenced by the ethnography of communication have been concerned with performative aspects of personal narratives. The interest in private segments of life resulted in shedding more light on structural and stylistic conventions of the narratives and their contextual aspects. Some basic attitudes in the behavior of the teller have been described in details and found related to the point of view of the story, thus opening new horizons in the

field of study known as "the verbal art as performance". But what seems to be the most important contribution of all the research to transcribing such a material is that personal narratives have been used to provide abundant evidence in supporting an older idea - the participation in the reported events and, consequently, the narrator's point of view transform the experience of our life world into the narrative act. The latter gives form to real events. The act of narration, many seem to believe, provides voices for real people and renders our life world observable.

Without testing the hypothesis, a great number of researchers have taken personal narrative for "the method" to approach the reality. Consequently, the so-called "life-history approach" has been accepted in social sciences which depend on the fieldwork, affirming the idea of "a natural access to social history".

This paper is intended to bring some doubts in the hypotheses which define personal narrative in folklore research. It will focus on the relation between narrative forms and our experience of the life-world. Two theoretical assumptions will be re-examined:

a) In our interpretations we are inclined to take for granted that in autobiographical discourse the story is based on *actual* records and documents, referring to the events that "really" happened at some point in the past.
b) There is still a strong belief among most of the folklorists and linguists-anthropologists that oral forms tell us about their social environment, indicating their speakers and contexts in which they would make sense.

The first argument which might disturb the self-evident nature of these assumptions can be derived from the concept of self-referentiality in language.

Any act of reporting involves a search for self-definition. Every simple description is the result of a highly complicated process of mediation. Reading or listening to the story about the events claimed to have happened in the past is in fact a search for the social scenario in the here and now, rather than for some past causes or motivations (Watzlawick et al. 1967, 45). We have learned from Goffman that events come to us already framed, revealing their interpreters as well as themselves.'Things are besides being themselves, also the story of our lives', wrote Eugene Baer, and Gregory Bateson was highly persuasive when claiming that at the very first moment of perception people already think in terms of stories rather than in some kind of neutral elements that are rearranged and given sense *a posteriori* (1979 : 14).

It follows, paradoxically, that the concept of actuality, of the events that may be (or may not be) personally experienced, cannot hold since '"the hic et nunc" is produced by the collapse (or near collapse) of the historical into the discursive'. To put it more radically, we do not constitute our stories out of some actual events which took place in the reality without the intervention of the subject. Quite on the contrary, we deduce the actuality of the events from the world of our stories. Events are not 'the raw material out of which narratives are constructed; rather an event is an abstraction from a narrative' (Mink 1987:201). By taking this tack, all sources appear to be secondary - they are all stories! In other words, we learn about the events from narrative forms, not from the direct insight into the social world outside language. "Narrative form is not a dress which covers something else but the structure inherent in human experience and action" (Carr, 65). To conclude, we live our lives through the forms of narrative experience.

There are no objective realities, just the distinctions among un-realities, in terms of the consequences that may affect the speakers. Our life world, not to forget, is at the very outset already intersubjective. This means that narrative experience should not be regarded as purely symbolic but rather as the reality responding to our needs for presentations. Every narration then results to some degree in a story of personal experience. Even some of the texts termed 'academic prose', commonly thought to

be the most impersonal of all discourse and highly fact-focused, share this characteristic.

The first argument leads to the second. It comes from the sociology of knowledge, practiced namely by Alfred Schutz.

It is true that narratives are situated communications, but every act of speaking has its own history. In every moment of speaking, people find themselves in a situation, but every situation is a product of prior situations. The experience of prior situations destabilizes the knowledge of the on-going communicative act because the past experience already engenders to some extent our future situations. The future has been in a certain way accomplished in the past so that our present situation, although it is in the process of self-definition, can never reach the stability of the moment which would be the very present moment (Berger, Luckmann 1980). This means that the experience of a particular context is never complete since what may appear to be the present situation is in fact a never-ending process of experiencing future-in-the-past and/or past-in-the future. Therefore, what we tend to perceive as a particular context implies an experience which is susceptible to time and change, rather than a moment of stability in a social environment. Such a quality of context means that the actual moment of speaking has already put the speakers in relation to other contexts, concrete or virtual. The same goes for the production of a narrative which has already put the speakers in relation to other narratives. Our personal experience is expressed together with the experience of others. We put it into words by using the words of other tellers who have already used them in different contexts. That is the reason why we cannot place our words *in* a particular context for they never come to us neutral but only *within* the texts of others. That is the main reason why they echo many contexts at the same time. Following this line of thought one arrives at the conclusion that a particular context inside itself nests other contexts, concrete or/and virtual, and that every narrative inevitably enters other texts. The story about an event thus becomes the story of framing, the narrative about us searching for the appropriate narrative form through other modes of narration.

Our social contexts do differ in quality, but the sharp boundaries between them, the boundaries that would make our social settings clearly distinguishable, cannot be established. Our experience of a particular situation is susceptible to permanent change, to the erosion caused by the flow of time. It is never completed in the way that we could have a clear idea of the present, and know for sure what exactly is going on now. If we are not able to stabilize the present moment, how can one expect the speaking subject to gain the distance and stay away from his or her own "communicative destiny"? And if the position of the subject and the moment of speaking are constantly in question, how can we ever step outside the process of self-definition? Finally, how can we expect to interpret the stories of others' personal experience without serving our own interests - those, for instance, which respond to the needs of the research? By asking these questions we are introducing a shift in perspective on personal narratives and their methodological status in folklore studies.

Personal narrative can be oral and written, represented as a monologue or in the form of a dialogue. It can be meant for public performance or for a highly limited audience (such as confessions or diaries). There is a narrative which happens because one is expected to tell the story of personal experience and that which happens unexpectedly, when the speaker is not asked to report on his experience at

all. It may even happen outside speaker's full awareness or intention, thus becoming part of another genre, which does not necessarily favor first person stories.[1]

In most scholarly works in folklore and anthropology, only the first category of personal narrative has been observed, that is the stories told or written because one has already merited the floor and is therefore expected to give such an account. This leads us back to the remark that the narrated events and the rhetoric of telling have been considered central in the analysis, rather than social conditions for the act of narrating. This preference is not purely coincidental, and therefore, it deserves to be re-examined. By taking such an ungrateful task, the rules of the global methodological orientation in the social sciences based on fieldwork should be taken into consideration.

The opportunities for 'personal communication' seem to be limited compared to the motives for it: everybody is entitled to have some kind of personal experience but not everybody is entitled to declare himself or herself to be the author of personal accounts. How do we achieve entitlement? What are the conditions that must be fulfilled in terms of the social reasons for communication so that someone, and not someone else, is given the floor?

In order to write a family saga, one must count on the readers who will plead for particular sensitiveness in presenting people's life-histories. In order to give a public confession, one must rely on the audience who will sympathize with the confessor. In order to tell more local anecdotes or hero tales, one must belong to the social group whose members need their hero, the hero for telling stories. What I have in mind is that the right to tell the story depends on the teller's experience as much as it depends on the needs of the audience. There is no successful teller without a good listener. And having a good listener means aiming at the appropriate audience. But the appropriate audience does not imply the search for an adequate person who will qualify for a specific type of reception. The audience is to a certain degree shaped by the role of the one who is invited to tell the story. One may say that the speaker by his entitlement articulates to a higher or lesser degree the audience for himself. If it was not so, how could we ever hope that our listeners or readers will react in accord with the proposed 'horizon of expectancies'? No narrative can be independent of a particular receptive structure and, therefore, we may assume that every occasion of telling is assured and maintained by a set of interests for listening. The following example might bring some clarifications.

We have all been exposed to a tremendous offering of autobiographical writings at a book market, memoirs, some of them cheap best - sellers in the line of kiss and tell stories. And we all too readily assume that the time has come when almost anybody has a right to publish the story of his or her life. We forget, however, that there would be many fewer books on such stories, had the conditions not been set for a certain type of audience. And the audience which is expected in this case is mainly 'the audience of hungry consumers'. The production of personal narrative will depend less on the speaker's desire for intimacy, and more on the quality of the social 'consensus' and the communicants' necessity to define it. The phenomenon of such publications are often associated with the pleasure of reading (or listening) other peoples' life stories. However, such examples are less revealing in terms of a universal hunger to penetrate other lives and more in terms of the problems that are

[1]Some dialogic situations in which there is a contrastive relationship between the partners have strict rules concerning the entitlement to tell the stories on personal experience. For instance, doctors are not expected to report on their own health problems and their patients are not supposed to question their doctor nor to ask him the 'personal' questions to which they are expected to give precise answers of a highly personal nature. Reversing the roles in such situations may jeopardize the identity of the genre: the doctor-patient conversation may turn into its own parody; one of the participants may be seriously offended.

beyond the content of such stories. They demonstrate in a striking way how 'obedient readers' (or listeners) we can be, how well prepared we are to conform exactly to the proposed pattern of reception. A good listener or a good reader is the one whose receptive structure meets the horizon of expectancies of his speaker or writer, who conforms to the social role, not the person who understands best the other person. In this view, then, the entitlement to tell as well as to listen to the story of personal experience will depend on how the communicants act out their roles and, by acting out the roles, how they succeed in shaping each other. The communicants become entitled to the stories as a consequence of their attempt to solve the conflicts between their personal aspirations and the social reasons for interaction. Thus, the reasons for achieving (or losing) the rights to tell the story correlate with the interests in listening to it.

The assumptions about the story narrated from a particular point of view (often identified with the view of the person in the role of the narrator) and the story dependent on its "natural" social context are unsatisfactory since the context is constantly out of reach and the view keeps changing. What we perceive in some stories as a relatively stable context and, consequently, their relatively distinct point of view should be attributed to the effects of the rhetorical presentation of the narrative and not to a position that hardly ever changes or that can be taken outside language. What we tend to describe as the most relevant or 'natural' context appears to be the result of making-sense. It is a matter of rendering coherent the on-going verbal transaction, and not a given framework in which texts would fit more or less. The efficacy of the rhetoric, the strategies of narrative coherence, the versions of self-identity advanced by the game of the language seem to be then more interesting for the analysis than the content of the story, its relation to the past, to the world of actual events and real persons.

It has been suggested that in autobiographical discourse the world is filtered through the self. The experience is thought to be synthesized and reformulated through the medium of language and through the consciousness of the subject. What is called 'private experience' then seems to be 'shaped into public form', and recognized 'through the means of traditional attitudes and expectations' (Bennett 1985 : 96).[2] As if language is the road map of cultural patterning, always there to show traditional elements! As if self-identity and the effect of personal experience is primarily a matter of direction, which the story shows by telling us: Follow this trail! One should be more careful in supporting such presumptions since what we mean by the world and by its traditional attitudes could never possibly be reached or identified without the mediation of the subject who does the identification. And the subject is always-already involved in the social consensus, so that it is difficult to know for sure the moment when collective turns into private and the "traditional patterns" become creative acts.

The problem of the subject is not the problem of self-representation, but of self-recognition. What happens in language is not the act of symbolic representation, but rather a pursuit of the self in search of his or her own intentions, motivations and desires. Here I do not dare to develop an important issue such as the problem of the self, for it would demand far more space and interdisciplinary argumentation. Instead, I propose to extend the argumentation by following another line of reasoning.

Let us recall briefly one of the hermeneutic conceptions of narratives and their relation to the world of events. According to Paul Ricoeur's formula narratives are

[2]Gillian Bennett emphasizes the great value that personal experience stories have in showing tradition actually in process, by shaping everyday experience: 'So through an examination of personal experience story we can discover what aspects of tradition have remained constant and still shape people's daily expectations and perceptions' (1985:92).

"models for the redescription of the world" in the process of interpretation (1983, 105). The effects of mediation, as Ricoeur suggests, are caused by the activity of the "mise en intrigue", which is the activity of the text. The "mise en intrigue" is seen as a process, not an implied narrative structure, which follows the rules of the narrative action. Therefore, the relation between the text and its reference is seen in the process of re-definition.

In contrast to what hermeneutic theories seem to propose, the studies depending on intersubjective criteria of verbal communication suggest that the relationship between the addressor and the addressee , not the text itself, is already a process. The subject or text-agent, not the product of its activity, should be viewed as an open-ended entity. This means that "narrative action" and the process of mediation do not start with verbal symbols. They are prior to the moment of utterance, being at work behind the verbal forms of representation, operating already at the very moment of perception. It follows that narrative cannot tell secrets about the world because what they imply - social knowledge or social context - is never in the stage of knowledge that can be taken and used as we use objects. They cannot function as given concepts which would already be there, waiting for the subject to lay his or her eyes on them. They stubbornly resist any perception because the narrative subject never reaches the standpoint *above* the process of narration from where he or she would take all in at a glance.

No narrative form can be a model of representation, for the subject cannot step outside the act of his or her coming into being and therefore cannot take full responsibility of self-definition. The subject mediates, but cannot control the process of making sense. Therefore, we cannot hope to reconstruct hidden meanings, the meanings *behind* language, for there is nothing to be discovered, only our urge to find out. And by finding out we hope to control the process of self-recognition and turn our social life into the object of perception.

In this regard, neither the concept of self nor the world correspond to the entities which might be viewed at a distance, i.e. away from the observed subject. They would never lend themselves to a satisfying description. If this is true, then one has to admit that our key-concepts such as "natural social context", "personal experience" or "the events of real life" seem to be inoperable in the analyses which pretend to give a "closer insight' into the modes of narration and their reference to history , i.e. to the world of actual events. The self cannot be turned into its own object, for the moment we decide to observe its manifestations, once the language has made it live before our eyes, we have become part of the linguistic reality. And by being part of the language, we have also become part of what is believed that language represents .

Personal narratives tend to be more manipulative than the narratives of other genres for they it desperately insist on telling us to see the opposite of what the interpersonal dynamics, their rhetoric and the politics of research imply.[3] What we see are true stories, motivated by a highly personal experience. We see the author unveiling one part of his personal identity. What is implied are the conditions of a delicate social agreement: one party is invited to tell the stories of personal experience; the other listens, does the recordings, transcriptions and interpretations in accord with the theoretical imperatives of the research. Everybody appears to be cooperative, but we usually do not know how the scholar, by his or her presence,

[3]Philippe Lejeune thinks that a great amount of autobiographical discourse is the most loaded with ideologies; it is the most frequent and the less studied discourse in terms of a critical approach (1980:38). Lejeune reveals that multiple instances are hidden beneath the 'I' which all end up in giving the impression of unity. His interpretation is particularly interesting when focused on modern autobiographical forms, such as interviews on TV. Their rhetoric as well as the ideological act of the self is analyzed in details.

influenced the personal account of the informant, nor does it come out how the process of research has been influenced and understood by the informants.

Both parties have interests in believing that it is the "real life" speaking through one's personal experience, through the collective patterns reflected in the texts. Both parties have interests in believing that such symbols and meanings generally account for the truths which in varying degrees of explicitness organize the reality of a social community. What this paper is trying to suggest is that actual elements i.e. the "facts" found *in* the collected material, like all facts in the human sciences, have been narrated and contextualized as to be recognized free of any particular context.

Personal narratives used in folklore studies or in anthropology are elicited by a fieldworker. The fieldworker is usually reduced either to a relentless investigator or an impartial by-stander. In both roles people doing fieldwork are expected to give evidence of understanding the world of their interlocutors. Interlocutors are their informants, taken for the representatives of a group, the group representing a people, the people representing a culture, etc. Such a chain of synecdoches influences the social context of the narratives which are told and performed before the people responsible for research. Both parties work on the illusion that telling the stories takes place outside the informant-scholar communication. The illusion serves their interests: the informant who is selected by an authority is given the opportunity to be the master of his tales, invited to communicate his knowledge about his culture and his people; the researcher, representing institutionalized knowledge, is given the chance to demonstrate how the knowledge works by integrating another's story into academic prose, which he or she will have the right to claim his or her piece of work. In that case the story of the teller enters another "story" where the authorship is bound to change. Now it appears to be owned by the one who signs the interpretation, not by the one who did the telling. In such a process - the process of transforming authorships where the authors are necessarily being transformed - one may understand better why the participants in fieldwork narratives strive to take the responsibility for the story and why, by affirming authorship, they believe to dominate one another.

The chance for the informant is in the act/art of telling; the ethnographer's territory is the moment of interpretation. The former should insist on this: I have been selected by an authority and therefore I have the right to tell or our lives. The latter should insist on this: this is *what* and *how* I was told and since the story was told to me who is entitled to listen, I have also gained the right to do the interpretation. By selecting the story and representing it to the audience of professionals, the "experience" and intentions of the fieldworker inevitably meet the interests of the academic community. Thus, while doing fieldwork the researcher is always-already involved in creating the social context in which listening, interpreting or understanding the stories would be pronounced valid. Only if the interpretation is accepted by the professionals, can the story be informatory. It will advance some clues or pieces of information about the teller and his or her social context. If the academic community says that the story is interpreted adequately, the personal narrative produced at fieldwork is given the status of a "personal document". All this is to say that fieldwork narratives are directed stories: their "natural social contexts" are necessarily influenced by the contexts which would favor their interpretation.

The parties involved in fieldwork narratives work on suppressing the clues that might give away their social interests. They act as if the narrated event is something the communication is all about. The rules of such narratives ("fieldwork narratives") say that different social interests of the parties involved should be replaced by the ones that are advanced by the rhetoric. If it is believed or made believe that our reasons for telling and/or listening to the stories concentrate on what they say and how they are told, the recordings of our data will "show" us different social contexts

represented in the narrative form. And this holds for any narrative learned in fieldwork, not only for the stories of personal experience. Only if we "forget" about the social needs which determine the roles in which scholars and their informants are allowed to communicate, we may expect our life-world and cultural reality speak to us from the collected data.

Stories of personal experience do not achieve their meanings in the natural social environment of the storyteller. If they have a meaning, it is the interpretation that makes them meaningful. The discourse of theories is the real context of personal narrative, not the context of their telling. Stories that become our data make sense only if the story-teller's intentions meet the aims of the research, only if "the flavor of oral performance" responds to the questions which are allowed within our theoretical perspective.

Despite the fact that such an agreement may suggest an egalitarian partnership according to which the communicants work together for the same 'cause', the "autobiographical pact" between the informant and the fieldworker implies the idea that one party works on achieving authority over the other. In other words, what may be recognized as reliable knowledge of the self and of the world is in fact an endless struggle of the parties involved, represented by their different interests and motives, for territory and domination.

The dilemmas for folklore studies cease to be how a particular example of personal narrative is related to the real events and whether the transcriptions correspond or not to the versions that have been told. Rather, our basic concern seems to be the following question: why has the particular version been singled out to serve our scientific interests?

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Osobne priče kao metoda u istraživanju folklora

SAŽETAK

Osobne priče ili pričanja o životu autobiografskog karaktera smatraju se u folkloristici "usmenom građom" u kojoj oko istraživača prepoznaje kolektivne modele iz društvenog života određene kulturne zajednice. Ovaj prilog preispituje dvije teorijske pretpostavke koje su ugrađene u definiciju osobnih priča. To su:

a)pripovijedani događaji temelje se na zbiljskim zgodama;
b)takve priče imaju status "osobnog dokumenta" jer cjelokupnom svojom izvedbom i ulogom kazivača upućuju na prirodni društveni kontekst iz kojeg potječu i u kojem znače.