

# Ethical Problems in Research Involving Contemporary Witnesses<sup>1</sup>

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*This article describes ethical considerations in the practice of oral history in Germany. It considers interviewee's motives, researcher interests, the ethical dilemma of open-ended interviews, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the interviewee's "double role," the structure of an interview, anonymity, the interviewee's influence on the transcript, the ethics of interpretation and publication, the concept and practice of confronting the interviewee with the interviewer's interpretation of his or her life story, and the ethics regarding the archiving of interviews.*

Very early during my reflections on ethical problems in research with contemporary witnesses this question thrust itself upon me: would I actually be ready to give an interview about my life story? Certainly, my life story is still relatively short – most persons who are questioned are substantially older and perhaps for that reason alone have more to tell – but perhaps I would be of interest for an educational-biographical examination of the “victims of the reformed senior high school” or for a sociological study of pastors’ daughters who often but not always lean toward political extremes. Whatever, how would I react?

My spontaneous answer would probably be no – after all, one knows what awaits one. But then I would nevertheless probably ponder this question again because my refusal would appear to me to be unfair – unfair because in my work I need others to agree to such requests. Why do they do so?

## The Interview Inquiry

### Interviewee's Motives

What motives might play a role, when someone is ready to give an interview about his or her life story? What interest can someone have in devoting one or two afternoons and engaging in a great deal of memory work?

- He or she might want to help the researcher as a person or
- hope for a relationship with the interviewer – especially when the interviewee is a lonely person.
- He might feel honoured that he will contribute to knowledge.

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- He could assist a cause or a political or social group with his interview.
- He might have a social, political, or religious interest in passing on his experiences and worldview.
- He might hope to gain insight into his own patterns of action or his own life situation and
- be happy to have the opportunity to tell his life story to an interested person – whether to take stock of his life or to pass on his experience.<sup>2</sup>

#### Researcher Interests

Which motives and interests dominate will, if nothing else, depend on an individual's current life situation and view of life. Whatever the case might be, all these interests are legitimate and it is the task of the researcher to ensure clarity where these interests collide with his or her own. The researcher will hardly see himself as being in a position to fulfil the desire for a longer term, social relationship and will also have no interest in a general exchange of life experiences. He should make clear what his motives are and thereby take into account that the readiness to speak of the interview partner is in any case an openness towards him as well. Let us assume there is an interview. What happens then from the perspective of research ethics?

#### Increasing the Willingness to Speak

It is important for an oral history interview that the interview partner is encouraged to tell as much as possible, especially things he would not simply speak of unthinkingly. A plethora of methods should encourage exactly this:

- The Interviewer should try to gain trust – from the first contact through well-intentioned, interested listening to the assurance of the proper handling of the information.
- The motto, "Give the interview partner security," points to the significance of a comfortable atmosphere. The interview partner should not be made to feel insecure through unfamiliar surroundings but should have the home advantage as much as possible. The choice of an interview location is really also an intrusion into the interview partner's private sphere. After all it also serves the acquisition of further information for analysis – from the type of furnishings, through habits and leisure activities, to relations with the partner.
- The interviewee should also be freed of any possible fear that his biography is insignificant: he is the "expert" of his life story; he is the contemporary witness. That this status does not mean that his statements will be taken at face value, that he might be an "enemy of the historical profession," is prudently kept from him.

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<sup>2</sup> Compare Werner Fuchs, *Biographische Forschung, Kurseinheit 3: Arbeitsschritte*, Hagen (Studienbrief der FernUniversität Hagen, 1982), 44-46; Werner Fuchs-Heinritz, *Biographische Forschung. Eine Einführung in Methoden und Praxis*, 2. überarb. und erweiterte Aufl. (Wiesbaden, 2000).

- In general it is recommended that the interview partner be not too precisely informed about the questions to be asked in order to avoid his focusing on specific subjects. He should speak as broadly as possible and not become selective too quickly. When comments are requested, one should postpone these so as not to influence the “open phase.”

It is precisely the “open interview process” that is not without deceitfulness toward contemporary witnesses. Certainly it makes sense to leave the interview partner with his own criteria for relevance and not to force him too quickly into a possibly completely unsuitable grid of questions. Therefore the interviewer should interfere as little as possible during the conversation, at best in the provision of new stimulation to the narration, indicating sympathy, and suppressing any growing suspicion and resistance.

Secrets of the  
“Open  
Interview”

The most important virtue of the interviewer is without a doubt the ability to listen. But exactly this produces for the interviewee an incalculable dynamic. He cannot know at the beginning of the interview what course the conversation will take, what he will speak about, what he will exclude. Neither the depth nor the breadth of his account can be predicted: on the one hand, because he can not judge the development of the relationship – what should he tell his interviewer or what would he want to; on the other hand, because he can not judge the pressures of telling his story. Whoever begins to tell a story is – to quote Schütze – “more or less obligated . . . to continue the story to its main point. Until he arrives there he is forced to present a logical sequence of events, and he can thereby find himself subject to the pressure for the unthinking completion of the Gestalt and the provision of details.”<sup>3</sup>

To some extent the inherent demands of narration take away from the interview partner the control over his narration. In this sense the interview also always has a transformative character because the loss of control is, as far as possible, deliberately produced. An attempt is being made to suspend the usual rules of communication, in which everyone can more or less exclude unpleasant themes, ignore awkward questions, or simply hide what he does not want to mention. This unfamiliar conversational situation also does not provide for the normal exchange of dialogue, which allows the narrator the possibility of reflection.

In the ideal situation for the interviewer the interviewee talks his head off. He tells things that he has never told before, or so he claims at least, often willy nilly reveals dark sides, and does not even recoil from contradictions.

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<sup>3</sup> Fritz Schütze, “Zur Hervorlockung und Analyse von Erzählungen thematisch relevanter Geschichten im Rahmen soziologischer Feldforschung,” in Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen, eds. *Kommunikative Sozialforschung* (München, 1979), 184.

The interviewer is fascinated; he has shown himself to be a good interviewer and has produced highly complex material in need of interpretation. The interview partner has succumbed to the fascination of narration, has adhered to all the narrative constraints, and even his omissions will not help him. Even these have left traces in the interview, which the interviewer will follow in his analysis.

An Ethical Dilemma

It is obvious that such an interview method is not in every respect witness-friendly. Certainly the interviewee can present himself in all his breadth; nothing interrupts the flow of his thoughts, the interest devoted to him by his listener is assured. On the other hand this can also mean that the witness is allowed to walk straight into a trap – without his noticing it at all. Actually this dilemma is taken into consideration in deciding in favour of the open interview. It is precisely because of this that it is necessary to reflect on this issue.

Negotiating the Interview Situation

Let us go back again to the beginning of the interview. Whether explicitly or implicitly, a negotiation of the interview situation takes place and determines the basis upon which the interviewer and the interview partner will deal with each other.

The interviewee is unlikely to have any experience with biographical interviews. He will perhaps try to orient himself according to familiar situations, such the medical history provided during a visit to the doctor, an application speech, a counselling session with a social worker or a therapist, a police interrogation or an exchange of memories with a friend. In order for him to fulfil his intended role, he needs further clues.

The Witness As Partner

Where the interviewee, as a contemporary witness, is treated as an expert, it is completely appropriate as well to take him seriously as a partner in the creation of a source. Generally this is so not only for ethical reasons but also for methodical reasons. Taking on the role of partner in the production of sources can motivate the witness to do his best for the success of the venture. He will strive for exact memories, report thoroughly, and permit even unpleasant questions because he is aware of the importance of his role and anticipates the significance of his efforts.

Significance of the Tape Recorder

The presence of the tape recorder also generally contributes to the clarification of the situation. While frequent resistance to this equipment is expected, interview partners usually react calmly. They do not let themselves be intimidated even by video cameras when their significance is made clear to them. Tape and camera underline their role as contemporary witness. The microphone is pointed at them; the interviewer takes on the role of listener. For the narrator he is a cue giver when the thread of narration breaks or a kind of correcting “first reader” on whom

the consistency and the persuasiveness of the story can be tested. The actual audience, which the tape represents, is much bigger.

On the whole I have the impression that witnesses view the recording of the interviews positively because they see it, completely correctly, as a token of high regard. No remark should be lost; everything is important. The tape can also give the interviewee the certainty that his words will not be falsified. They are at least clearly documented and controllable by him and others.

#### Turning Off the Tape Recorder

However casual the conversation might be, the tape recorder is not completely forgotten. This is revealed when the interview partner suddenly asks for the tape recorder to be turned off. For the interviewer this is an uncomfortable situation because without the recording the interview is meaningless. But naturally he is also curious about what the witness wants to tell him off the record. He will try to convince the interview partner of the insignificance of the tape, but if he cannot be convinced, the recorder must be turned off. If the witness were to discover that the recorder was secretly left on, it would be very difficult to continue the interview in an atmosphere of trust. Of course one should not miss the chance to turn it back on, though this is actually not that easy because it is not always possible to understand why the interview partner wanted to turn the machine off in the first place. Sometimes the reason given is that the names of persons, about whom something shameful is being reported, should not be documented. Frequently however, the misgiving is unclear, which is particularly interesting for the analysis.

Naturally the witness has no opportunity to keep these passages out of the analysis. As soon as the tape recorder is shut off, the interviewer will listen especially carefully, so that immediately after the conversation he will write a report on exactly these passages in as much detail as possible as well, obviously, as what was said before and after the recording. Particularly after the machine is turned off the conversation often enters another new phase. Problematic themes, hinted at earlier, can now be approached more openly. Exactly such information can be especially important in the later interpretation and, naturally, as with all other observations, is included in the interview report.

#### Asymmetry of the Interview Situation

The witness does not leave his double role. He is both subject and partner in the production of sources but also the object of observation for the interviewer and object of the research process. This is connected to, if nothing else, the asymmetry that is unavoidable in an interview situation. No equal reciprocity of biographical communication as in ordinary conversation is planned in the interview. The basic situation is that one speaks and the other listens. There is hardly any reversal of this conversational direction and therefore also no relationship in the common sense, no getting to know each other, no building of trust in which each reveals

something about himself. One person tells about himself, opens himself up, renders himself exposed and vulnerable; the other remains outside, stays a stranger. The interviewer is seen by the interviewee only as a researcher and also used by him as a projection screen, condemned to concurrence. Even if the statements of the interviewee are very distasteful to him, he appears to be his accomplice, exudes agreement.

For the interviewer the situation is not necessarily simple. Just when he finds the opinions of the interview partner grating because they clash with his own views or he disagrees with the interviewee's statements, he will find it difficult that he cannot simply join in the conversation.

#### Dealing With Annoyance

It appears to me that the interview situation itself is not the only reason for considering a phase at the end of the interview, when the interviewer can bring up his questions, irritations, and disagreements. This phase must not involve injuring the interview partner's feelings or pressuring him to justify himself. Taking the interviewee's statements and judgements seriously must also include confronting him very carefully with the contradictions and inconsistencies in order to provide him with the possibility of going into more detail and elaborating his point of view. Such disclosure of misgivings and objections also makes it possible for this interview phase at least to remain relatively free of the furtive "superiority" of the researcher.

That he really will proceed with tact and care in his questioning should already arise from the unequal relationship. From the present and from the position of the uninvolved observer things often appear clear and obvious, but when the events and actions described took place the situation was understandably less clear to the narrator.

Whoever does not possess the necessary degree of interested tolerance – and that means the ability to tolerate other life stories and views of life – should not carry out biographical interviews. In the first place he would learn nothing new from this source anyway. In the second place his attitude would be a challenge for the witness, whose task cannot after all be to fulfil the expectations of the interviewer, even if this purpose might not be entirely absent in the witness's presentation.

#### Importance of Listening

The way in which the biographical narration is presented in the interview is actually not independent of the person to whom it is addressed. The interviewee will at least try to tell his story so as to find consensus. It can also be assumed that the age and sex of the interviewer will affect what is told. However the narration also has a monological character. Not seldom do the interview partners compare the interview to the writing of an autobiography. And it is exactly those who shy away from that or give up in the face of the necessary effort who value the

opportunity for such an oral narration of their lives. It is exactly in “bad” interviews that it is often revealed that the interview partner wants to tell his story, no matter how insensitively the interviewer works against it. Perhaps at times we overestimate the importance of the listener; perhaps he is, at least sometimes, replaceable.

Interviewer-  
Interviewee  
Relationship

At the end of the interview what kind of relationship has actually developed under such delicate circumstances? It is not exactly a relationship in the narrow sense of the word. After all, one of the potential partners in this relationship could not bring himself into it at all. But there is certainly a great intimacy that does not often arise in everyday communication. It is not uncommon for interview partners to declare that they have told the interviewer more about themselves than they have told anyone else before.

It is certainly not really easy, to revert to an impersonal type of relationship from this intimacy. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that this reversion is usually quite successful. Apparently both sides accept the unusual character of the conversational situation, not least its asymmetry. Seldom are there questions about the life history of the interviewer. Equally seldom are there expectations of the maintenance of continuing contact after the interview. More often it appears that each takes the other as a representative: the interviewer sees the witness as the bearer of specific characteristics that make him interesting for research; the witness sees the interviewer as an emissary from science sent to research him. This does not exclude the possibility of personal contact or the development of sympathies, but most of the time no relationship develops that continues beyond the research process.

### *Anonymity*

The ethical claims on later processes depend to a large extent on the type of end product the source will become because the possibilities of anonymity vary greatly. Few problems will arise when it can be ensured that the interviewee is not identifiable, as in a scholarly publication that has a limited circle of readers who in most cases will have little contact with the milieu of the interviewee. The situation is different when it concerns a local history study or research in a narrow field that will find its readers in this milieu. Potential readers might well be residing in the environment of the interviewee. When a video interview is made for an exhibition or a documentary film it is completely clear that the interviewee is present not only in word but in picture.

The witness should know in advance what is to be done with the interview so that he can take this into account in his statements. If he has to assume that his neighbours will see him in the local history museum, he will certainly be careful

in his comments about his home surroundings, while on the other hand he will speak very nonchalantly if he can assume the readers will be anonymous scholars.

#### Agreement over Use

In each case there must be an agreement with the interview partner about what will and may happen to the source that was produced, not only in fairness to the interview partner but also as security for the researcher. Such an agreement can be made before or after the interview. It can be in writing or it can be referred to orally on the tape. The agreement should describe the context in which the interview is to be used. The interview partner should also be assured of anonymity in any publications as far this is possible. If the material is to be used in exhibitions, museums, or other public settings specific provisions must be agreed to. In such cases it is advisable to present the finished product to the interview partner for his agreement, if only to prevent legal uncertainties. Basically, however, the interview partner should allow the researcher to carry out an independent analysis, for, from the point of view of the researcher, only if the research is guaranteed freedom does the investment in a life history interview make any sense. At this time it should also be clarified if the interviewee agrees to a later archiving for the purpose of further scholarly research.

Even if the legal weight of such a declaration should not be overestimated, it will at least have the effect of giving the interview partner a sense of obligation, a step that he will not simply take back without thinking twice. One should, however, make clear that such an agreement is not of much benefit to the interviewee. In the end he is granted no right over the source that was produced. What more could be possible?

#### Dealing With the Transcript

One could at least offer the witness a copy of the source that was produced in collaboration. Experience shows, however, that it is advisable to provide the tape recordings rather than the transcript because the written form of spoken speech takes some getting used to. The witness rarely finds his interrupted sentences and truncated word endings charming. There is hardly a sentence that barely meets even the minimum grammatical standards. Reactions to the transcript are themselves worthy of analysis. Frequently the witnesses want to correct the written version. At best, this would produce a second source that could be interesting if compared with the first, though the witness believes that the first source has become invalid. The result would really be a mountain of new ethical problems.

### **Interpretation and Publication**

It is interesting that it is mostly the language through which the witness feels himself exposed; it is rarely his stories, however monstrous they may appear to

the listener. Displeasure with the contents develops, if at all, only in the discussion about the analysis of the interview. The interviewee is not usually annoyed by his statements but is displeased by how these have been dealt with: edited, ripped from their context, misunderstood. The carefully considered comments about forced labourers and the persecution of Jews, Autobahns and *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) appear suddenly to reveal a connection that he never intended. The accents have been shifted and the assumed agreement with the interviewer collapses like a house of cards.

The  
Contemporary  
Witness As the  
Object of  
Analysis

During the interpretation process the relationship reverses itself: the passive listener becomes the active interpreter; the active narrator becomes the passive interpretee. The putative subject of the research, the partner in the production of the source, now finally becomes an object. This is a tricky turning point for research ethics. What can one do?

It is possible to try to extend the partnership model of the production of sources into the interpretive phase by making the validity of an interpretation dependent on the agreement of the interviewee. The interviewee gets the last word and thus, apart from any ethical considerations, is deemed to have the “final authority” in regard to the facts.

The possibility and meaningfulness of such a procedure depends on how extensively the interview material is analyzed and this depends on the purpose of the research. If, for example, it concerns the cultural self-representation of a specific group, the analysis will not go as far as it would for a psychoanalytical interpretation. As long as the interviewee is deemed an informant, an expert, his stories and reports will not be completely reinterpreted but rather will retain their own voices. Here the interviewee can surely be the “final authority.” The partnership model is different, even impossible, when something is done with the biography that the interviewee cannot understand or must see as an attack on his identity.

During the course of interpretation the researcher can reach the conclusion that he understands the interviewee better than the interviewee does himself. He will stumble upon gaps and contradictions in the narrative that present further avenues for extensive elucidation. He will ask himself if the interviewee could be at all conscious of the way he conducted his life in all its areas, if he was qualified to speak about this or that theme without reserve, and which subjects he had forgotten and why. The trap of open conversation laid in the interview snaps shut. The contemporary witness stands convicted; his representation of himself cracks. While he remains trapped by the pressure for self-justification and the need for displacement, the researcher can, from the secure distance of the uninvolved, put the fragments together in a new way.

Beware of  
Interpretations  
That Go Too  
Far

However instructive such interpretations can be, they are nevertheless not always appropriate. As an interpreter, one should not succumb to the danger of conviction at any price. Doubtless there are systematic barriers to remembrance. The failure to include specific themes can be due simply to the interview situation itself. Not every contradiction reveals unconscious motives; the situation being described might itself have been contradictory. In some circumstances, uncertain, contradictory evidence is more correct and more appropriate for the interview partner than a consistent explanation from an outsider.

Therefore, the explicit interpretations of the interview partner should be the starting point for analysis. The first step should be concerned with understanding the construction of meaning by the contemporary witness. Not until the second step would one ascertain if this construction is the appropriate one or if other constructions could be a better fit.

Naturally I will not deny that such sources require analysis, but I want to emphasize the rightful claim of the contemporary witness to deal seriously with his attempt at interpretation – not only for ethical reasons but also in the interests of “finding the truth.” After all, the witness could be right.

### ***Regarding Communicative Validation***

Regarding  
Communicative  
Validation

Can it make sense or even be appropriate to confront the witness with the interpretation of his life story and to make him a partner at this point? The process of communicative validation rests on the idea of an equal working relationship between the researcher and the interviewee. In fact such symmetry does not exist: the researcher is only the interpreter of the details of another, while the interviewee is both an interpreter and an actor. While the researcher can develop and keep testing new interpretations, the interviewee must interpret and explain at the same time. The researcher presents his case history for discussion, the interviewee his identity.

Confronting the interview partner with the researcher's analysis makes sense only if both sides are prepared to correct their own interpretations. However, it can hardly be expected that an interview partner is ready to discuss his opinions with a stranger and possibly even change them. It is also doubtful that the researcher would be ready to give up his interpretations.

All in all there are relatively few problems with contemporary witnesses when it comes to later interpretations mainly because the interviewee has no lasting interest in further developments. The overlapping of the two worlds is so slight that years later the publication of a witness's remembrances is often not noticed at all. In fact there are hardly any inquiries in this regard.

Of course it can still be worthwhile or even necessary to give the interviewee access in advance to what is going to be published. One should

certainly consider very exactly if the interviewee can be made truly anonymous or how he might react when he sees the text.

Editing the  
Language

Language is also a sensitive point in an interview. The interviewee certainly wants to recognize himself in his cited statements, though this does not necessarily have to occur through an exact transcription. On the contrary, as has already been mentioned, it is precisely through the writing down of their oral statements that contemporary witnesses often feel themselves exposed. But the allegedly flawed style of expression often has its own sense. It is, therefore, necessary to determine where this is vital for the interpretation and its understanding and where it can carefully be edited, without damage, into reader friendly, every-day language.

The Interview  
Partner's  
Interpretation

A second point relating to the keyword "Publication" relates to the interview partner's own understanding, the witness's own interpretation. It is precisely when the interpretation of the researcher differs substantially from that of the interviewee that he must strive for accuracy in his publication. The interview partner has the right to have himself and his point of view presented in complete, fair quotes. This is in my opinion the only possible condition under which the interviewee can take somewhat calmly the scholar's interpretation that inevitably follows. In the end the reader will be able to engage with both points of view: with the interview partner's personal explanation and the interpretation offered by the researcher. The responsibility for allowing for the appropriate self-explanation of the interview partner lies with the researcher who thus at the same time opens his own interpretation to a critical examination.

Since publication as a rule is directed at a specialist audience and not at the group of interviewees, it is advisable to make decisions regarding any possible conflicts of loyalty that might not favour the interviewee. Scholarly ambition might favour a bold thesis and reject a hesitant assessment. Such ambition, however, must be restrained at least at the point where publication could injure the interviewee, for example by damaging relations with family members, neighbours, friends, or colleagues, or if the contemporary witness is held up to ridicule.

Loyalty to the  
Interview  
Partner

In some way the interviewer will keep the interviewee in mind as a check. The attitude of interested tolerance will rarely lose its effectiveness completely. Whoever has become engaged in someone's life story and followed his explanations has perhaps understood more than he would like. During his analysis he will certainly step out of the point of view of the interview partner. Just seeing the transcript creates a greater distance and promotes a freer critical handling of the text and the contemporary witness. Still there will remain a lesser or greater

degree of loyalty to the interview partner that will lead to a certain caution in the analysis and publication. A later researcher will often approach the material much more critically because he can feel completely free in his relationship with the contemporary witness. This change in the approach becomes significant when it comes to archiving the interview.

## Archiving

Hardly anyone will disagree that the archiving of empirical research is fundamentally worthwhile. The information should be made available to others both for verification of the research results and for further analysis. As a result the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* Commission On Professional Self Regulation in Science recommended in its 1998 memorandum, “Zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis” (Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice) that primary sources should be kept in the institution where they originated for ten years in order to document the research process and to allow the review of the research results.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of qualitative data there is the additional feature that they possess a very high information content that can hardly be exhausted with one examination. If nothing else, the high cost of their acquisition makes their further use desirable.

Sensitivity of  
the Sources

In reality the archiving of biographical interviews is more often the exception than the rule. Far too often, after the first analysis, the material is stored in the home or office of the researcher and is unavailable to others. An important reason for the great caution in passing the material on is certainly due to the high sensitivity of the sources, insofar as it is very difficult to ensure anonymity, which is doubtless in the interest of the interviewee but at the same time conflicts with the interests of research. For, without the possibility of placing the source spatially, chronologically, and in relation to people, it is useless for many questions.

Informational  
Right to Self-  
determination

In the archiving of qualitative data both the ethical aspects of research and the legal regulations relating to the protection of the privacy of information are to be considered. Basically the issue is to reconcile the freedom of scholarly research with the so-called informational right to self-determination.

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<sup>4</sup> The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft or DFG is Germany's central public funding organization for academic research. DFG-Denkschrift, *Vorschläge zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis. Empfehlungen der Kommission "Selbstkontrolle in der Wissenschaft"* (Weinheim, 1998). Compare in relation to the following Susann Kluge and Diane Opitz, whom I thank for their suggestions: “Die Archivierung qualitativer Interviewdaten. Forschungsethik und Datenschutz als Barrieren für Sekundäranalysen,” *Soziologie. Forum der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, Heft 4, (1999): 48-63.

In 1983 the German Federal Constitutional Court stated in a fundamental decision regarding the census that the individual must be protected against the unrestricted collection, storage, use, and transfer of his personal information because modern data processing had advanced to the point where it was no longer possible to control the access and use of information. The basic right to the free development of one's personality clearly includes also the authority of the individual to determine the disclosure and use of his or her information. (BVerfGE – *Entscheidungen des Bundesverfassungsgerichts* – Decisions of the Federal Constitutional Court, 65, 43) The collection and processing of personal information is thereby permitted only when the law allows it or the person concerned has given permission.

This special protection is intended specifically for personal information. When information relating to persons is made anonymous it can be passed on to other research projects. However, as has already been noted several times, it is not possible to make qualitative data completely anonymous. Effectively making information anonymous would often require the deletion of whole passages of text, which is certainly not desirable for further analysis.

Privileges for  
Research  
Material

The informational right to self-determination is regulated through the laws for the protection of data on the federal and the state level. The Federal Data Protection Act recognizes special "research materials," for which certain privileges are granted. It permits the transfer of personal information to restricted locations, though exclusively for research purposes. The recipient must promise "not to process or use the transferred data for other purposes." Data relating to persons must also be rendered anonymous, "as soon as the research purpose permits."<sup>5</sup>

The protection of the interviewee thus remains difficult. It is always possible that his information will be passed on for research purposes, even without his consent. The issue of making this information anonymous is not clearly regulated. For the researcher interested in biographical and subjective experiences it is obvious that anonymity is not possible in many research projects. The contemporary witnesses involved might possibly see it differently.

What appears to be a circumvention of the informational right to self-determination is actually a calculated risk. In the estimation of the Federal Constitutional Court the aforementioned decision regarding the census noted that the risk of the misuse of data in scientific research is slight. Scholars are – as it has been put – "generally not interested in the individual person, but rather in the individual as the carrier of particular characteristics."

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<sup>5</sup> § 40 Abs. 3 BDSG (Bundesdatenschutzgesetz) Federal Data Protection Act, Section 40 (3) (Processing and use of personal data by research institutes).

Whether this situation can serve to reassure the interviewee still appears questionable to me. All in all the archiving of life story interviews remains a difficult process of negotiation between the responsibility to the interview partners on the one hand and the claim of the archives user for service on the other. It is a delicate undertaking with an uncertain legal basis, which can, in any case, function only when one strives for responsible dealings with a contemporary witness. The question of how one would feel as a contemporary witness oneself, which courtesies one would expect, and which conditions one would accept can be a helpful guide in this regard.

### **Concluding Remark**

Back to my initial question: would I be ready for a life story interview? To my own surprise I see that at the end of this critical discussion of all the aspects of an interview my aversion has decreased. What might be the cause? Apparently the interview does exert its own attraction, a certain temptation. It is simply not only a venture that provides the scholar with material to be ruthlessly interpreted for a study about “XY” – even if this actually is the reason. It also offers the interviewee an exceptional opportunity for reflecting about himself and his life and presenting this to someone else who listens with interest and patience without himself claiming any space. The life interview is something like an attempt at autobiography but without the effort of writing and without the finality of the written word.

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