



## Interviews that tell Life Stories

### Experience with Gathering Bio-/Autobiographies

As part of the European projects *Creating Community Voices* and *Digital Dialogue*, extensive interviews were carried on by the asbl Mediapolis-Europa in the southern Italian Community of Panni (Foggia). In an area that has been influenced greatly by emigration during the last fifty years, oral stories about individual's lives were recorded for the creation of an *Archivio del Patrimonio Autobiografico e di Memorie Storiche Scritte e Audiovisive dell'area Dauna-Irpinia* – an effort to preserve the local memory and specific traditions and experiences of the population.

Detailed information about the project is available at [www.digital-dialogues.de](http://www.digital-dialogues.de). To be found on this project website are transcriptions of personal interviews, but also important theoretical reflections on the nature of autobiographical narratives. Here, we present an excerpt from the documentation addressing topics of interview technique and listening methodology.

The recommendations are geared to the situation in and around Panni, a village whose culture, tradition and distinct language are considered threatened by extinction due to the dwindling population. The insights, however, are applicable to a wide variety of personal interview situations in which individuals speak about their own lives. Since such life stories can be of great interest in community radio, the suggestions made for interviewers in Panni are offered below.

### Working methods

Interviewing is a technique, but like every technique, it must be adapted to specific circumstances. In our case it seemed preferable to avoid questions on the habits and traditions, and to interact in a semi-free manner – asking very open questions like: your most vivid recollections, the sense of work, your vision of the future – and leaving most of the talking to the interviewee.

#### *A few suggestions for the interviews*

- It is a good idea to get introduced by a local. Trust comes from a feeling that the interviewer is included in the community.
- It's preferable to be alone during the interviews. Their success is based on the gestures, the expression, a certain empathy: the interviewee's freedom of expression.
- The interviewer must understand that the storyteller has an *interior voice* that communicates the individual vision of what he has lived through, the ethics that guided him, and the intentional choices that are the foundations of his life. This is not explicit, but is the leading thread of the narration.

- The success of the interview often depends on an initial agreement. It is usually best to interact as little as possible.
- A woman interviewing seems to be easier to accept, because she is perceived as a social being (see Edgar Radtke, *Bollettino linguistico campano*, 2002 - 1; page 9).
- It is indispensable to accept and understand the dialect in the locality.

### *To be avoided*

- Routine questions
- Orienting the conversation towards themes that might give it too much of a direction
- An authoritarian presence
- Censorship of the dialect

### *The leading thread of the interviews*

The people who have been interviewed up to now are more or less of the same age (60 years old). They have led different lives, fulfilled various roles, and were chosen according to the idea of a representative sample.

The stories are very different. One aspect, however, unites them. They all express the same deep beliefs. If on one hand the philosophy of the interviewees is to take what happens quietly – expressing wisdom and a certain fatalism –, on the other hand their behaviour is the fruit of a highly selective experience from an ethical point of view, and therefore intentional and deliberate. The people we interviewed displayed a fundamentally balanced relationship to themselves.

### *The contents of the interviews*

The recurring themes

- Emigration and social success
- Thoughts about the past, turning it into a myth
- Love

These people have a very strong point of view.

The tone of their voices is also very lively: half way between *souvenir* and *avvenir*, the past, in their stories, is never really past. The autobiographical narrative is in fact often in the present tense, a clear sign of interaction between experience and formulating plans.

*As Donato says – 65 years old – emigrant, then farmer and factory worker, to this day a tireless worker: Però...simm'stat'bene (All in all, we had a good time...).*