

INTERVIEWING WOMEN OF HIGH “ECHELON”, IS IT CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?*

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Abstract

This article deals with issues of narrative, subjectivity and experience concerning the life histories of the women of high “echelon”. Despite the fact that oral history gained a widespread legitimacy in academic field, oral account of the elites remains an unproblematicized matter which requires enquires with respect to potential methodological and theoretical contribution it may offer. Therefore, in the framework of possibilities provided with feminist analysis of social power and feminist methodological approaches, considering the oral account of women of high “echelon” has the potential for generating a comprehensive understanding related to gender. Besides, that provides the researchers with the opportunity to evaluate the use and the value of oral account in social sciences.

Keywords: Elites • life history • narrative • subjectivity • experience.

YÜKSEK “KADEMEDEN” KADINLARLA GÖRÜŞME YAPMAK, ÇELİŞKİLİ BİR İFADE Mİ?

Öz

Bu makale elit kadınların, başka bir ifadeyle yüksek “kademedede” bulunan kadınların yaşam tarihleriyle ilişkili olarak anlatı, öznellik ve deneyim konularıyla ilgilenir. Sözlü tarih akademide geniş bir meşruiyet kazanmış olmasına karşın, elitlerin sözlü beyanı, potansiyel yöntembilimsel ve kuramsal katkısı sağlayabilmesi bakımından yeterince sorunsallaşmamış ve üzerinde daha fazla araştırma yapılması gereken bir konu olarak kalmıştır. Öte yandan, yüksek “kademededen” kadınların sözlü beyanını değerlendirmek, toplumsal iktidara ilişkin feminist kuramsal analizin ve aynı zamanda feminist metodolojik yaklaşımların sağladığı olanaklar çerçevesinde toplumsal cinsiyetle ilişkili bütünlüklü bir anlayış geliştirme potansiyeli içerir. Yanı sıra, araştırmacılara sosyal bilimlerde sözlü beyanın kullanımını ve kıymetini değerlendirme olanağı sağlar.

Anahtar sözcükler : seçkinler • yaşam tarihi • anlatı • öznellik • deneyim.

Why Gathering Oral Account?

Oral History, which provided the history with a social purpose, according to Paul Thompson (1999, s. 5), renders a more fair judgment inasmuch as that the evidence might

* The title of this article is inspired by the article by Ann Oakley titled “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms”. In this article, Oakley discusses methodological problems of interviewing. She considers traditional interviewing situation as a one way process and searches for feminist practice of interviewing in order to achieve both to validate women’s subjective experiences and to close the gap between feminist theory and exercise of interviewing. (Oakley, 1981).

rely on experiences of those who were among lower classes, unprivileged and oppressed. For this reason, in accordance with the aim of revealing hidden voices, researching women’s lives became one of the top subject matters of oral history. Oral history as a method of research inquiry arose from the need to use oral traditions of non-literate groups or to supplement data in the absence of written documents (Thompson, 1981, s. 290). Additionally, more than a research method, it also led to a theoretical expansion in social sciences and history. Oral history has contributed to history in the sense of not only opening up new areas of inquiry such as labor history, family history or demography, but also in shifting its focus. Hence, any social research became more than dealing merely with events, structures or patterns of behavior; it took into account the way these were experienced and remembered in the imagination of the actors and observers (Thompson, 1999). Likewise feminist thought has benefited widely from contributions of feminist oral history by putting women back into history. This attempt was about overreaching simply adding women or their contributions into historical storyline, furthermore has turned out to transform the methodology of both history and sociology. This could be achieved through reevaluation of issues of narrative, subjectivity and experience; in other words by moving beyond essentialist understanding of experiences of women. Issues involved in feminist theory took also its innovative character in its research methods. Methodological and epistemological concerns about power relations in feminist thought led the discipline to prioritize studying those who are disadvantaged; in other words, studying down instead of studying up. Combined with concerns for eliminating or minimizing the power differences and for creating a reflexive research process, feminist methodology and epistemology went beyond existing positivist approaches in social sciences.

In the framework of feminist theory which underscores knowledge of women through reflexive research methods problematizing the power differences between the researcher and the researched, narrative, subjectivity and experience, thus knowledge of women of high “echelon” could not expected to be at top of importance. Yet, theories of power and of experience contributed to feminist theory broadly that helped to evaluate intersectionality of identities and experiences (Harding and Norberg, 2005, s. 2011-2012). However, as related to those known as power holders, the value of experience and the meaning of subjectivity vis-à-vis narrative research methodology might be considered open

to theoretical contributions as well as original researches. In this context, as a theoretical review and a discussion, this article in general is a quest for the meaning and use of interviewing women as related to their narratives, subjectivity and experiences. In particular, it is an attempt of insight into methodological results of giving voice to women of high “echelon”, a pseudo contradiction in terms.

As aforementioned, oral history made a remarkable progress as an interdisciplinary area with the aim of recording information about those people who left no or little documentary source, though, it was not until the postwar years in the West that, oral history of elites or elite interviewing could become a frequent and legitimate part of academic inquiry. Before the Second World War, both recourse to individual elite witnesses in order to make systematic interview and practice of formal note taking¹ were equally unconventional in doing social or political research. Making interviews with the people of power or high positions became highly popular after 1960s that not only junior historians and post graduate students doing interviews was seen more acceptable, but also senior figures started to approach the researchers willing to gather their oral witnesses more enthusiastically. At this point, the term elite seem to refer loosely to “...those with close proximity to power or policymaking; the category would include all elected representatives, executive officers of organizations and senior state employees” (Lilleker, 2003, s. 207). For the sake of a broader definition which is beyond the confines of politics, elite can be defined in simple terms as power holders. Yet, a more flexible definition is needed in order to elicit the use of elite interviews that is going to be discussed later in this article. Consequentially, methods of in-depth interviewing as related to elites are began to be used broadly and now oral sources have become an important area of practice in political as well as in social history (Seldon and Pappworth, 1983, s.8-10). Despite the fact that elite interview have been associated with more journalism than academic research, certain disciplines like sociology and political sciences rely on elite interviews a lot (Phillips, 1998 cited in Kezar, 2003, s. 397).

Recently, in addition to oral archives or oral projects, individual academic endeavors brought say of the elites into consideration that provided researches with what oral account might and did offer. Among the benefits of oral account of the elites is the opportunity to

¹ The level of technological development as well as scarcity of technological devices for individual use makes it inappropriate to mention here about the audio-visual recording equipments for conducting interviews.

have information about specific events about which documentation is scarce, but eyewitnesses still survive. Additionally among the contributions of the oral account which is one of the areas its richest contribution would occur is that oral history might lead the historian to read between the lines as related to its subjects. In another words, oral account has also merit of supplying information about personality and manner of thought and life of its subject that can bring insight into mere sequence of events as related to subject’s ideas, preferences, particular traits and so on. Moreover, another benefit of an oral account is that it might shed a light into political processes or personal and organizational relationships which do not generally get into official records. (Seldon and Pappworth, s. 37-40). What has been represented about elite interviewing so far is confined to political history, yet in-depth interviewing of the elite ought to be broadened to social history and related areas of social research. What makes this expansion applicable is the assumption that despite the innovative practices it brought into social sciences oral history is not a new kind of history, but rather a type of source or evidence. As a type of evidence, oral history primarily differs from documentary evidence corresponding to *what actually happens*. Rather, oral history stands closer to reported evidence which corresponds to which is transmitted about what happens.

Reported evidence might be either contemporary (recorded or transmitted by the informant at the time of what happens) or retrospective (recorded or transmitted by the informant after what had happened), yet it takes the form of oral evidence when it is transmitted to a third part, here a researcher, in oral communication. The distinction between documentary evidence (in the form of cabinet minutes, reports or correspondence) and reported evidence (in the form of written or orally communicated account of what happened) marks the status of each type of evidence vis-à-vis the other (Seldon and Pappworth, s. 4). So, depending on the research situation, oral history can be used as the evidence on which the research project will primarily be build up or be given a complementary status in order to support or to verify the documentation. Yet, oral history in general and life history in particular represent a more mutual treatment of both types of sources. This article is a close look at interviewing women of high “echelon” with respect to the life history for two reasons. That the combination of the documentation and the oral account as equally valid and respectable sources of evidence constitutes the first reason.

Additionally, familiarity of the author with the use of life history² makes it valuable to assess its exercise and consequences theoretically as well as methodologically.

What is Life History?

Life history differs from life story or oral history for the reason that it includes supplementary biographical information drawn from other sources in addition to the person's own story. Additionally, it can be comprised of official records, archival sources, printed material, letters, memoirs and interviews with acquaintances (for example relatives and friends or colleagues). So it consists of an effort of collecting one's life. On the other hand one of the main sources of the life history is oral accounts of the person himself or herself or of those who have a close connection with that person. Gathering oral account of a person means doing an interview in general terms. Hence, methodological principles of doing an interview rule planning and analysis of interviewing. So what happens if those principles seem to vary according to those who are interviewed? This is the case with elite interviewing.

In the case of collecting material related to a top rank person, even if there is a lack of proper archives, it becomes relatively straightforward to reach useful material. As for gathering oral account of the life story of a person, even if the person is not alive, his or her acquaintances are possible to be approached. All in all, particular characteristics of interviewing a person of a high "echelon" necessitates to recourse to the related literature. There exists a bunch of literature related to elite interviewing including issues like process of planning and analyzing the interviews. It is this literature which gave the inspiration to think about first defining and designating the interviewees, secondly relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee and lastly truths of any interview.

Defining the High Echelon

The term "echelon" was chosen as a shortcut to refer to relatively partial and sometimes conflicting literature about elite interviewing. Apart from acknowledging the difference

² For the use of life history see Pinar Melis Yelsalı Parmaksız, *Modernization and Gender Regimes, Life Histories of the Wives of Turkish Political Leaders*, VDM Verlag, Dr. Müller, Saarbrücken, 2010.

between the research attempts “researching down” and “researching up”, there seems to be no agreement even on the definition of elite. Mc Mahan (1989, s. xiv) defines elite as to refer the distinction between elite and non-elite members of society. According to this distinction, the elites are those persons who develop a lore that justifies their attempts to control society. On the other hand, the non-elites are those persons who create lore to explain their lack of control. Furthermore, while Kezar (2003, s. 395) simply defines elites as people in power, Smith (2006, s. 645) contests the idea of segregating people into dualistic categories like elite who are powerful and non-elite who are vulnerable. She argues that no one is removed from the effects of power in societies. Rather, according to her, all those who makes important decisions or become part of decision making processes, are affected by the decision of others. Smith contends that specifying elites and non-elites simply reproduce the dualistic categories, hence, ignore the existence of power in variety of modalities. Moreover, although it is generally used as a shortcut to refer to people in positions of power, the use of the term elite remains highly unproblematised, nevertheless, it necessitates understanding of power in a society in general. From that point further, Smith (2006, s. 646) attempts to define elites through a more flexible interpretation of power. She replaces the possession of power with exercise of power, because, according to her, elites differ from others by their capacity of a routine exercise of power without significant challenge to their autonomy. Among others, Odendahl and Shaw (2001, s. 299) provide a more operational definition of the term elite. They recourse to Mill’s and Pareto’s definitions of elite and propose that elite individuals and groups who “are integral to every community, government, occupation and religion as well as other institutional spheres”, occupy the top echelons of society. Odendahl and Shaw suggest that elite people and groups generally have more knowledge, money and status and assume a higher position than others in the society. They also add that a shared sociability or a life style differentiate elite from others. In other words, shared set of attributes, behavior, values and lifestyles characterize elites. It is also possible, according to them, to generate typologies of elites according to hierarchy between different elite positions, demographic variables, religion etc. As a result, similar to Smith, Odendahl and Shaw also suggest that designation of elites depends on broader understanding of wealth and power in society. Thus, what makes their standpoint significant appears to be their sociological and historical perspective.

On the other hand there is a methodological perspective about defining and designating the elite. Dexter (1970) represents this approach by defining elite as those people in important or exposed positions whom may require VIP interviewing treatment. Defining and designating interviewees according to modes of interviewing lead Dexter to make a distinction between interviews which require non-standardized treatment and those which do not. The former type of interviews according to Dexter is characterized by its “interviewee centered structure” in which interviewee is encouraged not only to define the account of the situation but also to introduce a considerable extent coming out of his own notion of relevance. Besides, in a standardized interview, Dexter argues, the research question and the problem are set by the interviewer who looks for mere answers determined through a set of presuppositions. Conversely, in non-standardized interview, the interviewer appears to be eager to learn from the interviewee both about the problem and the extent or the relevance. In a similar manner, Merton, Fiske and Kendal (1990 cited in Kezar, 2003, s. 397) specify the characteristics of elite interviews in comparison with the other interview protocols. According to qualities they presume, first of all, in elite interviews, it is taken for granted that the interviewee is known to have been to a specific situation, because he or she is known for the position he or she once hold; besides the interviewer appears to have done a preceding research about the interviewee. Although the interview guide is prepared on the basis of this provisional analysis, the interviewee’s definition of the situation determines the results of the interview.

Gaining Access and Setting Interview Situation

Difficulties of gaining an access to people under study can not be seen unique to elite interviewing. Gaining access to members of a particular social group, may it be an ethnic, religious or a sub cultural group can be difficult as well. Similarly, social identity of the investigator might be regarded as a barrier for a particular group (Smith, 2006, s. 648). Thus, the role of the investigator might be decisive respectively in the process of gaining access and during the interview situation as well as at the stage of interpretation.

Difficulties related to the role of the investigator for gaining access to members of a particular social group refer to a basic set of concerns which specifically gain importance in

cross cultural researches. As Thompson (1999, s. 189) argues, some kind of social nuances might play a crucial role in the practice of an interview with varying degrees. As detected commonly in ethnographical fieldwork, cultural norms, rituals or meanings might affect both the access of the investigator and the conduct of the interview. Lila Abu-Lughod (1999, s. 12-35) in *Veiled Sentiments* exemplifies and narrates the difficulties she faced in doing the fieldwork research in a Bedouin group quite expressively. She explains that despite the fact that she was a professional anthropologist with Arab ancestors and Arab sociability, she needed her father's intervention in order to persuade people of her respectability. Because a young, unmarried woman traveling around alone would be regarded as an anomaly, she argues. Without her father's intervention to introduce her to the local people in a convenient way and to make initial contacts with the Bedouin households, she could not have been welcomed by those people. Another aspect of the role of the investigator that Abu-Lughod points out is connected with the interview situation. As she tells, she had stayed in a Bedouin household for some time that allowed her not to talk to people but also to be able to observe private life of the group more closely. Additionally what had enabled her to go into the very heart of the Bedouin sociability was a particular role assigned to her, she claims. Since she could able to gain access to Bedouins by means of the intervention of her father, she asserts that she would soon recognize that she was regarded almost like an adopted daughter which guaranteed protection of her by the head of Bedouin household as well as the unique opportunity go deep into inner life and thoughts of Bedouin societies. Thus, since any interview is a two sided situation, the role of the investigator might determine or at least affect both the possibility of access to a particular group and the results of the interview. In one way or another, the interviewee assigns an identity to the interviewer which in turn might become an advantage as well as a disadvantage for the purposes of the interview. Endemic to ethnographical methods of research, respectively gaining access and role of the interviewer including ethic responsibilities requires a special care and attention from the investigator before going into the fieldwork, so much so that it might even endanger the actual process of data collection. According to Paul Thompson (1999, s. 173-174), not only the question of gaining access to people of a particular group but also the success of an interview largely depends on the success of the investigator in approaching to those people under study. He suggests that, doing a successful interview requires some skills, but even those who lack of competence in those skills might learn how

to conduct better interviews. The recommendations of Thompson in order to achieve a successful interview focus on the traits which the interviewer is supposed to have or develop throughout the interviewing practice. Those traits which gain importance in the course of setting the interview situation and maintaining a meaningful interview requires from the interviewer to acknowledge the people under study as respectful others and to treat those people accordingly by showing his or her eagerness to listen to what he or she asked them to tell and by responding them in a way not to defend a rigid point of view. A useful starting point, according to Thompson might be collecting a preliminary set of knowledge related to the people or specific events under study. Such a pre-research attempt might include doing informative interviews as well as literature review that eventually help the investigator not only to design a better questionnaire but to be prepared to tackle with particular situations the interview situation might bring forth. Depending on the individuals or groups under study, difficulties might vary that requires a special attention and multiple strategies from the investigator as it is in the case of getting oral accounts of the elites. It is for the reason that, as Desmond argues (2004, s. 265, quoted in Smith, 2006, s. 646), the relationship between interviewer and interviewee in elite interviews "...is inevitably asymmetrical regardless of the research strategies deployed".

From that point further, Dexter's statement about the VIP interviewing treatment can be considered beneficial in the context of gaining access to elites. It is generally accepted that it is particularly more difficult to access to elite people that may require extensive homework and creativity on the part of the interviewer. According to Odendahl and Shaw (2001, s. 307), overall knowledge of the researcher about the elite culture under study as well as personal networks and institutional affiliations play a crucial role in gaining access to elite people. Familiarity with the elite culture functions to locate key informants whom eventually might contribute to researcher's credibility in order to get into contact with a wider circle of informants. Gaining access to elite people might also require negotiation or multiple strategies and several telephone calls with personal assistants or other gate keepers which can be exclusively labor intensive. At times, knowing other people who know the person under study or attending to would be interviewee's frequent events or meetings can be useful. Problems related to gaining access to elites emerge out of their power positions, though, as Hunter (1995, cited in Odendahl and Shaw, 2001, s. 308) notes, the researcher

must not ignore or underestimate his own power. So the investigator might profit from his academic affiliation which can inspire seriousness and reliability to people under study and turn to be a key for investigator to gain access to those who are more reluctant and even defensive and also it may trigger them for an earnest contribution. Nonetheless, the interviewee may use some strategies like letting assistants or gatekeepers to make a questioning in advance about the interviewer's identity, background and reputation or the interviewee may interrogate the researcher on the purpose and use of the interview in the very beginning of an interview session (Odendahl and Shaw, 2001, s. 310). Elite interviews also require a special attention and multiple strategies from the interviewee in order to establish interview exchange. At this point, a more flexible attitude from the interviewer might be helpful. Various factors might play a role in interviews with elites including gender, age, social status and reputation. As Odendahl and Shaw (2001, s. 311) state gender becomes an issue in many interview exchanges that women interviewers generally struggles to accommodate the prejudices of the interviewees against their gender. McDowell (1998, s. 2138, quoted in Odendahl and Shaw, 2001, s. 312) interestingly exemplifies how gender might become an issue in interview as follows:

In some interviews I seemed to fall into the classic male-female pattern, for example with an older charming but rather patriarchal figure I found myself to some extent 'playing dumb'; with an older and extremely fierce senior woman I was brusquely efficient...with younger men I was superfast, well informed, and definitely not to be patronized.

As for the gender of the interviewee as a determinative factor in interviews with elite people, Çakır (2006, s. 64-65) gives an illustrative example. As she describes, in the context of a project about documenting the obstacles for women in entering into institutional politics, she plans to gather oral accounts of the female members of the parliament. As soon as she attempts to make appointments with the female MPs, she realizes that it would not be possible without using multiple strategies like writing a letter giving information about the project, making several telephone calls with personal assistants, or establishing contacts with other people who know those MPs. Even those strategies did not work; she acknowledges the existence of some other kind of obstacles which prevent those women to cooperate. According to Çakır, those obstacles which as a matter of fact constitute the reasons of low level of representation of women in the parliament result from the

vulnerable position of female MPs vis-à-vis more senior or other male colleagues. It is because that, female MPs appear as power holders in an area where their existence is regarded unlikely, anyway.

Another factor determinative in interview exchange is age; in other words as Odendahl and Shaw (2001, s. 312) put it, big age differences that might be detriment for establishing mutual understanding, especially when the interviewer is considerably younger than the interviewee. Çakır (2006, s. 61) also emphasizes the exact point and states that when the interviewee is considerably old, then, rather older interviewers should be preferred instead of younger ones. Additionally, if there is a remarkable age differential between the interviewer and interviewee, this might restrain the interviewee to narrate a more detailed and comprehensive story; for the reason that the interviewee might consider the interview situation is not an exchange between peers. Or worse, if the interviewer is a different person but not the coordinator of the project, interviewee might interpret the situation as if he or she was not respected enough. This last point is strongly connected with the issue of social status which is generally considered important by elites. Self presentation of interviewer and subsequently appearance of an exchange between peers can stabilize the power issues in elite interview. Depending on particular cases, interviewers should be capable of finding different strategies. For example the academic affiliation or reputation of an investigator can become potential way out in order to solve power asymmetries between the interviewer and the interviewee.

What is presented here so far is evolution of some difficulties common to processes of both gaining access and setting interview situation, in conducting interviews in general and subsequently in conducting interviews with people of high “echelon” in particular. As it can be seen, difficulties in gaining access to people under study are inherent in every fieldwork with varying degrees. So, I argue that, although different social contexts and power relations should be taken into account in some particular cases, hence, in order to label any type of interview as a particular genre we need to consider not only whom we interview or how we get to know them but also what we get from an interview.

Truths of the Interview: Narrative Approach

As mentioned above, what makes elite interviewing distinctive according to Dexter is that it is set by interviewee’s decision about the interview situation and the extent. On the contrary in standardized interview, the interviewer guides the interview situation to gather mere answers to his or her questionnaire (it might vary to include standard form of printed questionnaire, semi structured interview schedule or a list of guiding themes and concepts) determined through presumptions of a particular research project. Moreover, Dexter adds that while in a standardized interview a statistical analysis of a typical survey can be the way of analysis, in non-standardized interview any deviation comes out of interview requires a more interpretive analysis. Moreover, what Dexter offers corresponds to two of the approaches for analyzing biographical material suggested by Miller (2000). One of them is grand theory approach which resets on an unfocused interview and seeks to generate concepts through sorting and categorizing the data the interview provides. This resembles to Dexter’s non-standardized interview. The second one is neo-positivist approach which is based on a semi-structured interview schedule and seeks to evaluate predetermined hypothesis. That resembles to Dexter’s standardized interview. In addition to these two approaches for analyzing biographical material, Miller mentions of a third approach, which is narrative approach.

The narrative approach necessitates the interview schedule to be both open, not imposed on the interviewees, and to be focused because of the existence of guiding themes. The strength of narrative approach comes from its understanding of subjectivity and experience; as for life history studies, especially of the people of high “echelon”; it provides a valuable perspective to evaluate “truths” of biographical or autobiographical accounts. The approach privileges subjectivity, thus subjectivity tells us about the way lives are constructed by social actors and the ways culture, institutions and social structures shape actions and outcomes.

The narrative approach comprises three stages. In the first stage, the factual details of the interviewee’s life are determined and ordered in temporal sequence. The first stage might well precede the interview. After the factual data foundation is established, the second stage requires that a thematic field analysis be set according to the narrated life

story, which represents a thematic, interrelated, and cross-referential sequence of themes. The third stage deals with reconstructing both the perspective of the past and the meaning of the experiences and with drawing conclusions. At this stage, the main aim of the researchers is to reveal the historical consciousness of the respondent or the person whose life history is reconstructed. The first two stages of the narrative approach seem to coincide with another approach described by Gagnon (1981, s.53-55), which aims to analyze life accounts. Gagnon himself explains the need to construct a social time-order to reveal the reference points of the personal account. As explained by Gagnon, it overlaps with what Miller described as the thematic field analysis. With respect to Miller's third stage, reconstruction of historical consciousness, Gagnon offers a detailed scheme of analysis. According to Gagnon, who speaks from a bi-disciplinary (sociology and history) background, what allows one to deal with biographical accounts, either of an individual or of collective subjects, is a perception of the *representation of history*, which is the cognitive construction of organizing historical events. This is an act of remembering which presents itself through three ways of the reconstruction of time. The first is historical consciousness per se, which is associated with official history or depends on an alternative historical explanation. The second is the social representation of history, which allows objectivization of the past. Finally, there is a personal image of time. In addition to this classification, it would not be wrong to assume that two or three of these acts can be found intact in one oral account. This reveals the potential richness of the oral account as a product of reciprocal relations between facts or events and experiences lived through them.

Besides, in terms of strength in probing an understanding of the past, oral or biographical accounts should not be approached at face value. Rather, as Gagnon (1981) argued, an archaeological reconstruction of the emergence of each figure of historicity must be derived. Only by such an archaeological inquiry, may one create sociologically meaningful and historically relevant analyses. Of course, this does not mean undervaluing the credibility of memory; on the contrary, memory adds much to an archaeological inquiry through historicizing both the construction of subjectivity and practice of experiencing.

Narrators does not simply recall and transmit past events, rather they interpret them which makes memory essentially subjective. Moreover, the interpretation might even

involve distortion of the past events. In interviews with people from high echelon, the main problem appears to be that interviewees might seek to protect a public image or their oral accounts may adhere to role constraints and role expectations. Borelli (2002, s. 357) acknowledges this notion in terms of autobiographies of the American first ladies and suggests that they will “tell it slant”. Since memory is subjective, we might argue that to “tell it slant” is intrinsic to every personal account. Hence, as for biographical or autobiographical accounts of the people of high echelon, “telling it slant” should not discontent researchers rather they should benefit from positionality and subjectivity of narrative. In fact, according to Portelli (1992, s. 50), what makes oral history distinct is the fact that it tells less about events than about their meaning. Thus, the importance of oral testimony lies not in its adherence to fact, but rather its departure from it. For example; the interviewee might have conflicting ideas or shift between an active subject position and a passive object position depending on the issue. These might turn to be very valuable sources for researchers dealing with the people from high “echelon”.

Nevertheless, what happens if the researcher looks for factual data like dates or places in addition to narration? In that case as Bertaux (1981) suggests it is always possible to verify and cross check the information which the interviewee provides with supplementary sources.

Experience

In conjunction with subjectivity, another issue the narrative approach brings into forth is experience. The value and the use of experience have gained much of interest in the context of feminist research with respect to recourse to women’s experience. For this reason, dealing with the experience with respect to life histories from the angle of narrative approach can provide the researcher with the opportunity of focusing on feminist notions of his or her work. In this framework, Kezar (2003) exemplifies the attempt of conjoining feminist and narrative approach in order to set transformational elite interviews which aim at empowering interviewees. She also emphasizes the need to achieve relational, egalitarian and two-way model of elite interviewing. These are valuable concerns for raising feminist qualities of a interview based research, though, the way of analyzing what the researcher collected, be it biographical or autobiographical accounts, is also important. As Harding

(1983) already mentioned, the feminist standpoint resets on the perspective of women's experiences. She uses the women's experiences in plural and through claiming that women's experiences differs according classes, races and cultures there is no "woman" and "woman's experience", clearly avoids an essential conception of experience. Besides, Scott (1986) offers a more operational description of experience which is particularly inspirational for studying women's lives.³ Scott's perspective of experience rests on her analysis of the concept of gender. Having reviewed feminist theories of gender, Scott (1991) put forward a stratified definition of the concept of gender. According to her, gender as based on perceived differences between the sexes is the primary signifier of power relations. The concept of gender functions first to evoke multiple (and often contradictory) representations which are eventually underpinned through interpretation of normative meanings. The whole package determines the politics of gender relations inherent in social institutions and organizations. Yet, according to Scott, women and men do not literally fit into prescribed gender categories; instead gender identity is constructed as subjective identity. Therefore she calls historians (also apparently oral historians) out to examine the ways in which gendered identities are substantively constructed. Then she requires relating the findings of the historians to a range of activities, social organizations, and historically specific cultural representations". Eventually, she specifies that biographies might provide historians with valuable insights into analysis of construction of gender. From that point further, evaluation of the term gender by Scott guides the analysis of experience and its potential strength for life history analysis. As Scott (1986) explains, in general, an individual is not only a person who has an experience, but also a subject who is constituted through experience. In particular, women's experiences can not be seen as a pre-given ontology that precedes its expression, but as a construction within particular cultures and periods. As for women of high "echelon", following the reasoning of Scott, it can be argued that as being strongly related to the top positions or power they hold, the experiences of women of high echelon appear to be constitutive part of their subjectivity. In other words, the experiences of

³ For a broader and critical debate about the value and use of experience in women's history and gender history, and also for a discussion about evolution of the development of both disciplines, see, Judith M. Bennet, "Feminism and History", *The Feminist History Reader*, Sue Morgan (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2006, Penelope J. Corfield, June Purvis and Amanda Weatherill, "History and The Challenge of Gender History", *The Feminist History Reader*, Sue Morgan (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2006, Joan W. Scott, "Feminism's History", *The Feminist History Reader*, Sue Morgan (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 2006.

women of high echelon are valuable not because that they come out as the other side of fixed dichotomy of gender which presupposes hierarchy and oppression on the basis of perceived differences between the sexes; but because that experiences are the outcomes of subjectivity constructed through intersections of manifold variables affecting one's social position. As Thompson repeatedly and of course correctly points out, the oral history, which has a profound influence on life history, has focused on individuals or groups who were invisible in the history. For that reason, as mentioned before, oral histories of subalterns, working classes or women have been the most popular subject matters. The same can be said for feminist researches about and for women. As well as researching on women as victims of male domination, adding women or their contributions to theory and history have been the ways of doing feminist research. Yet, researching on women as subjects whose gender identities are constructed through their experiences might provide them with a sort of agency. Earlier it was mentioned that subjectivity comes out through personal interpretation of experience. Subjectivity, also arises out of a dialectical relation between the individual and the societal, in other words, between the biographical and historical. From that point further it is necessary to remind Thompson's statement related to matter of about whom to conduct oral history research. Thompson (2006) acknowledges the increasing interest in the lives of elite groups and suggests that there is always something to learn about historical past and social life from the lives of those who were for example once privileged land owners or religious functionary. As for women of high echelon he contends that there is still a lack of research on elites in general and elite women in particular.

Interviewing People of High Echelon: Is it a Separate Genre?

The present article aimed at discussing the ways of doing a research on women of high “echelon” as related to matters of narrative, experience and subjectivity. As explained in the article, specific difficulties of doing an elite research does not make it a separate genre, instead it should be considered as a mode or method of doing research. Although there is a pile of literature about how to design, conduct and analyze elite interviews, most of them seems to offer practical guideline for the researchers. However, some parts of the literature on elite interviewing seem to have concerned with the truths of interview that have some share with the general perception of narrative turn and reflexivity in social

thought. Within the limits of this article narrative approach as an appropriate methodology for doing a feminist life history research on the women of high “echelon” was discussed, though that might have raised more question rather than answering the aforementioned questions. Yet the author believes that new questions might evoke better methodological approaches which are eventually expected to contribute to our theoretical understanding about the issues of subjectivities and identities. As Mills (2000, s. 6) once asserted “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” remains the strongest promise of what he calls sociological imagination.

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YAZAR HAKKINDA

Pınar Yelsalı Parmaksız, Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Siyaset Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümünde araştırma görevlisidir. Sosyoloji, toplumsal cinsiyet, sözlü tarih, yaşam tarihi ve bellek çalışmaları alanlarında çalışan Yelsalı Parmaksız’ın ilgili alanlarda yayımlanmış makaleleri ve *Modernization and Gender Regimes, Life Histories of the Wives of Turkish Political Leaders* başlıklı yayımlanmış bir kitabı bulunmaktadır.

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ÖZET

Sözlü tarih yaklaşımı toplumsal olarak iktidarın dışında kalanları yani ezilenleri ve dışlananları görünür kılmaya bakımdan tarihin toplumsal amacına katkıda bulunur. Disiplinler arası bir çalışma alanı olarak sözlü tarih, pek çok disiplini gerek yöntemsel gerekse kuramsal olarak dönüştürücü bir etkiye sahiptir. Yanı sıra sözlü tarih disiplinler içinde pek çok alt alanı da beslemiştir ve şimdiye kadar toplumsal ve tarihsel analizin içermediği kadınlar gibi öznellik durumları ve kişisel ilişkiler gibi alanları da kapsayıcı olmuştur. Bu nedenle, sözlü tarihin feminist düşünceye katkısı özellikle toplumsal cinsiyet ve kadınların deneyiminin kuramlaştırılması bakımından büyük önem arz etmektedir. Feminist çalışmaların genel olarak sözlü tarihi ve özel olarak da sözlü tarihin popüler kıldığı yaklaşım ve yöntemleri, kadınların gizli kalmış sesini ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla ele aldıkları görülmektedir. Bu çerçevede toplumsal olarak iktidar konumunda bulunan kadınların söz konusu akademik ilginin genel olarak dışında kaldığı söylenebilir. Toplumsal cinsiyete ilişkin özcü tanımlardan hareket eden ve kadınların öznellik ve deneyimini bu çerçevede değerlendiren girişimler söz konusu eğilimi temsil etmektedirler.

Genel olarak elit olarak tanımlanan kişilerle görüşme yapmak sosyal bilimlerde gazetecilik pratiğinin ötesinde sistematik bir pratik ve bilgi edinme ve tanıklıklar sağlamak açısından geçerli bir kaynak olarak yakın zamanda meşruiyetini sağlamıştır. Öte yandan elitlerle görüşme ve elitlerin sözlü beyanına başvurmanın gerek siyaset ve sosyal bilimler açısından gerekse tarih disiplini açısından sağlayacağı yarar konusunda oluşan anlayış, elitlerle görüşme yapmak konusunda belirli bir literatürün doğmasına yol açmıştır. Söz konusu literatür ağırlıklı olarak sahaya yönelik yol gösterici bilgilerden oluşmaktadır. Yanı sıra literatürün elitleri toplumsal iktidar ilişkilerinin genel çerçevesi içine yerleştiren ve elitlerle gerçekleştirilen sözlü görüşmelerden elde edilen verilerin geçerlik ve güvenilirliği üzerinde değerlendirmeler içeren bir boyutu da vardır.

Toplumsal cinsiyet konusunda yapılan çalışmalarda sözlü tarihin sağladığı olanaklar elit kişilerle yapılan görüşmelerinin alana getirdiği bakış açısıyla bir arada düşünüldüğünde, elit kadınların sözlü anlatılarına başvurmak ilk bakışta çelişkili gibi görünen zengin bir analiz alanı ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Elit kadınların anlatıları, toplumsal cinsiyeti ve feminist araştırmaların dayandığı temel bakış açısını oluşturan kadınların deneyimini

sorunsallaştırmak bakımından zengin bir kaynak oluşturmaktadır. Bu makalede, elit kadınların biyografilerinden, özellikle de yaşam tarihi anlatılarından yola çıkarak, toplumsal cinsiyete ilişkin olarak deneyim ve öznellik meseleleri üzerine metodolojik olduğu kadar kuramsal bir tartışma yürütülmektedir.