4. Methodology: Biography Research, Narrative Interview and Grounded Theory

In this chapter, I outline the methodological background of the study by introducing the approaches of biography research, narrative interviewing and Grounded Theory. In this context, I explain my decision to adopt a combined qualitative approach and reflect on working with the different methodologies.

The studies presented in the last chapter score points with clear quantifiable results, especially with regard to causalities and correlations, as well as the representativity of results. Qualitative research methods, on the contrary, focus on the understanding of social reality, more concretely on individuals' lifeworlds and their subjective interpretation of the reality around them.

Given my research interest in the constitution of national belonging among Ukrainian IDPs in the face of the ongoing conflict in the Donbas, a combined qualitative approach was chosen: narrative interviews with a biographical approach for data collection and Grounded Theory for analysis and as a general research methodology, which will be presented next.

I decided on a qualitative research design as it allows for an open perspective as well as an in-depth exploration of the complexity, diversity, variability, and situatedness of national belonging. For this purpose, it provides the means, firstly, to extract the elements of national belonging from empirical reality rather than to derive them from theoretical assumptions (see chapter 4.2) and, secondly, to capture the necessary contextual information, since utterances are considered to be indexical (cf. Haug et al. 2017: 5). This is particularly relevant in a context where one's nation-

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al belonging is confronted with and thus contested by extreme social and political circumstances. Hence, a qualitative approach rounds out the broader picture presented by a quantitative approach (see chapter 3) by elaborating on the role and significance of national belonging elements and by linking the individual to the societal level.

4.1. Biography Research and Narrative Interview

Aiming at the reconstruction of social or psychological phenomena in their biographical genesis (cf. Rosenthal 2001: 2), the *biographical approach* facilitates analyzing national belonging through a contextual perspective. The biographical approach thereby assists in unfolding the subjective meaning of feeling Ukrainian, the role self-identification as Ukrainian plays in respondents' lives, and explaining the elements of Ukrainian national belonging. In this context, the biographical approach enables me, among other things, to shed light on the processes of creation, reproduction, and transformation of national belonging and its functions, and on the biographical constellations and social interactions in which national belonging is important for individuals (cf. Rosenthal and Bogner: 2009: 15f, Rosenthal 2004: 49). At the same time, it enables me to examine changes over time and to capture cause–effect relationships concerning the object of research (cf. Haug et al. 2017: 5).

However, the focus on the subjective dimension of biography does not mean that the findings cannot be interpreted for the societal level. Viewing biography as a dialectically developing social construct[16], this approach facilitates overcoming the dualism between the individual and society (cf. Rosenthal 1994: 2): By postulating that an individual's life history as well as a society's collective history interpenetrate each other, the mutual constitution between the individual and society is emphasized from the theoretical perspective of biography research (cf. ibid.: 4). Therefore, the

16 A biography in its general development as well as the current subjective interpretation of one's past are an individual and social product at the same time (cf. Rosenthal 2001: 2f).

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narrated life story refers beyond the personal to the collective history, as the impact of historical events and processes will be found in life stories regardless of the consciousness of the interviewee (cf. ibid.: 4f).[17]

The *narrative interview approach* was chosen as the method of data collection. Developed by the German sociologist Fritz Schütze in the 1970s, it is widely used for biography research and oral history (cf. Strübing 2013: 97), but also in other social scientific fields (cf. Rosenthal 2004: 50). The narrative interview approach is preferred here because it encourages the subject to narrate in an unrestricted manner, which reveals the subjective experience of the individual. This method focuses solely on the subjective relevance of the interviewees and avoids external direction of their thoughts through default questions. Consequently, their autonomously designed narration or biographical self-presentation reveals the relevance they ascribe to elements of their lives (cf. ibid.: 98). At first, respondents are invited to narrate their life stories using a single, broad *narration stimulus* (›Erzählaufforderung‹ in German)(cf. Rosenthal 2001: 5f). My narration stimulus corresponded to the modification of Schütze's narrative interview by German sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal (2001: 8, 2004: 51):

> »I would like to ask you to tell me the story of your life as well as of your family, all the experiences which come to your mind. You can take as much time as you like. I will not interrupt you, just take a few notes and come back to it later.«

17 Rosenthal differentiates between ›*life history*‹, as the life one lives through, and ›*life story*‹, as the narrated version of one's life. At the same time, she also uses the terms of ›*experienced*‹ or ›*narrated life history*' to emphasize the difference between one's experiences and how someone narrates their personal past. This differentiation is particularly important given that the presentation of one's biography (life history) is constituted by one's present perspective on the past. Thus, the life history narrated is the production of a ›specific‹ version of one's past. However, narratives of the past one has experienced refer to one's current life as well as to past experiences (cf. Rosenthal 2006: 1, 4; 2004: 49).

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After respondents have finished their narration or biographical self-presentation, the interviewers can pose further questions for clarification.[18] These questions have to stimulate further narrative potential (cf. Rosenthal 2004: 52). At the end, the interviewers are allowed to ask questions related to the research question to ensure that each interview covers all facets of the research interest (cf. ibid., Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal 1977: 418). Keeping external questions for the interview's last part ensures that the interviewers' »own relevance system« is not imposed on the interviewee (Rosenthal 2004: 52).

According to Schütze (2014: 229), the functioning of the narrative interview is based on three kinds of *narrative drives and constraints* (›Zugzwänge des Erzählens‹ in German) which, by being a propelling power as well as a guiding constraint, influence how human beings narrate their life histories—non-intentionally and unconsciously from the side of the interviewee. The narrative drives and constraints exert a power on the narrator to »(a) to go into details, (b) to close the gestalt, and (c) to assess the relevancies and to condense« (ibid.). More precisely, this means, first, that the narrator has to provide all necessary details, meaning about time, events, places, and people, to create a comprehensible story about their life for the audience (›Detaillierungszwang‹) (cf. Strübing 2013: 156). Second, the narrator is also propelled to complete narrations (›Gestaltschließungszwang‹) (cf. ibid.). Third, the interviewees have to condense their narration to the essentials of their life histories as well as to link all aspects of the narrated life story, thus creating a leitmotif for their life histories (›Kondensierungszwang‹) (cf. ibid.). Narrators will thereby narrate their life histories in a dense way, as their time and attention span are limited. This means that narrators choose which parts of their lives they want to talk about and how detailed their narration is. The importance hereof lies in revealing subjective relevance (cf. ibid.). To summarize, narrative drives and constraints do no restrict narrators but overrule their own intentions during narrating (cf. Schütze 2014: 229). Hence, interviewees will even touch upon topics and experiences they wanted to remain silent about because once engaged in a nar-

18 Interviewees signalize the end of their narration by using coda like ›That's all.‹ (cf. Flick 2002: 230).

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rative flow, they are said to ›lose control‹ over the narration (cf. Flick 2002: 230, Strübing 2013: 156). Besides narrative passages where these three narrative compulsions can unfold, narrated life stories will also contain other elements, such as anecdotes, argumentation legitimizing one's actions or attitudes, or descriptions (cf. Strübing 2013: 156f).

Since my research interest does not focus on the reconstruction of the biographies of Ukrainian IDPs, but on their sense of belonging to Ukraine, I chose not to work with biographical analysis methods, but with Grounded Theory, which is a more flexible methodology and is compatible with a variety of research interests, also within biography research. Nonetheless, my decision to use narrative interviews with their biographical approach contributes to the analysis of national belonging here: First, this approach enables me to illuminate the subjective meaning and significance of national belonging and its elements, especially the elements' function(s) and their relations among each other. Second, by covering life context in order to interpret the data, I can examine how national belonging is evolving and how it is influenced, among others, in the face of the armed conflict in the country. The approaches of biography research and Grounded Theory are compatible, as both share the interest in the social embedding of individual experience and social processes and have mutually influenced each other. In the context of research on biographies, Grounded Theory is particularly used to examine identity (work) as a facet of biographical work (cf. Müller and Skeide 2018: 57).

4.2. Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory was developed by the sociologists Anselm L. Strauss and Barney Glaser in the 1960s and has become an important part of qualitative social research since then (cf. Strübing 2013: 109f, 2014: 1).[19] Ground-

19 Due to disagreement between Strauss and Glaser, both developed their own understanding of Grounded Theory later. I follow the idea of Grounded Theory developed by Strauss together with his colleague Juliet Corbin. My reason for doing so lies in the epistemological positions of Glaser, which are no longer tenable in the philosophy of theory (cf. Strübing 2013: 111), while Strauss' version is more consistent in terms of

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ed Theory aims at theory genesis which has to emerge from the data itself so that *theory is grounded in the data* (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996), criticizing the deductive approach of testing theoretically derived hypotheses and categories (cf. Strübing 2013: 112).

This methodology is founded on the tradition of the *Chicago School*, in particular on the *Symbolic Interactionism* of Herbert Blumer and the *ethnographic research tradition* of Robert E. Park and his fellow scholar Everett C. Hughes (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008: 1–8, Strübing 2013: 111). Additionally, Strauss was also influenced in his thinking by *Pragmatism*, represented especially by John Dewey (cf. ibid.). Overall, Grounded Theory is a *social constructivist approach* which impugns the idea of a universal, objective reality and instead emphasizes the multi-perspectivity, processual nature and subjectivity of social reality, created, maintained, and altered through social interaction (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008, Strübing 2014).

Consequently, Grounded Theory rejects the traditional call for objectivity within the social sciences (cf. Strübing 2014: 39), thereby stressing that a research field is also constituted by scientists through their work with and in the field (cf. ibid.: 45). This becomes most prominent within the analysis: »Though participants speak through data, the data themselves do not wave flags denoting what is important and what is not« (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 49). It is the researcher who ›translates‹ the words and actions of the interviewee (cf. ibid.) by creating a »coherent and explanatory story from data« (ibid.: 48). Hence, relevance is not inscribed into the material, but produced by the researcher, who decides what is relevant according to the perspective of the research question (cf. Strübing 2013: 114f). In this context, it is necessary to consider that a researcher's view on the data material is shaped by scientific, professional as well as their personal prior knowledge, education, and experience (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008: 32, Strübing 2013: 114f).[20] To conclude, researchers are

the concept of theory and science (cf. Strübing 2014: 4). For a discussion of their disagreement and a profound debate about the limitations of Glaser's Grounded Theory approach see, for example, Strübing 2011 and 2014.

20 Based on the pragmatist belief of the continuity of knowledge, Strauss does not only understand scientific, but also personal (and vocational) knowledge as ›prior knowledge‹. This means that knowledge is in itself always theoretical so that there is no du-

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not neutral observers of social reality, but interpreters of their data and decision-makers about their research project. Hence, scientists are also always subjects in the research process, so that theory has to be seen as a subjectively shaped product (cf. Strübing 2014: 12). At the same time, referring to Grounded Theory's understanding of reality, »researchers interpret things differently and, thus, will come to different findings and conclusions about the same piece of data« (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008: 49). Consequently, there cannot be universality, objectivity of theories or a universal criterion of truth (cf. Strübing 2014: 39f).

Regarding the organization of the research process, Strauss and Corbin propose an *iterative–cyclical model of research organization*, emphasizing the temporal parallelism and mutual functional dependency of all research phases—in contrast to the classical consecutive division between data collection, data analysis, and theory building (cf. ibid.: 11, 32). It is argued that such a research approach optimizes the adequacy of the data as well as the data collection itself, and, thus, promotes the conceptual density of the evolving theory (cf. ibid.). This means that the sampling or the interview questions should not be predetermined from a theoretical perspective but evolve out of the iterative–cyclical research process (cf. ibid.: 113, 116).

Grounded Theory is based on a multi-stage analysis method called *coding,* which is differentiated into *open*, *axial,* and *selective coding*. *Open coding* means deconstructing the data, or more precisely, ascertaining what the data conveys about the object of research: first, by conceptualizing relevant data pieces. This means working through the data and to label words, phrases, or whole passages of text with a certain, but provisory, *code* or *concept* (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996: 43–46; 2008: 161). Second, structuring the data by subsuming similar concepts under the same *category* (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008: 46). Categories are higher-level, more abstract labels, encompassing a whole group of concepts (cf. ibid.: 73). In the end, a system of categories is created which mirrors what the data is about. As a result, categorization »provides a language for talking

alism between common beliefs or everyday theories and scientific theories. In a pragmatist light, scientific theories are the generalized and systematic part of practice-relevant knowledge being the basis of scientific work (cf. Strübing 2014: 60).

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about the data« (ibid.: 160). However, as open coding produces a list of unconnected, highly descriptive categories (cf. Strübing 2014: 17, 2013: 119f), it is *axial coding* which brings relations into the evolving theory (cf. ibid.).[21] Axial coding means recomposing the categories after the open coding by identifying the relations among the categories (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996: 75). Lastly, *selective coding* brings the missing leitmotif into the evolving theory (cf. Strübing 2013: 121f) by putting together all the categories like pieces in a puzzle to create a coherent theory. The first step in selective coding is to find the *core category,* which has the »greatest explanatory relevance and highest potential for linking all of the other categories together« (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 104). Subsequently, all the categories have to be analytically arranged around the core category (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996: 95, 101).

Due to Strauss and Corbin's criticism of deductive approaches as well as their emphasis on grounding theories in the data, it was misunderstood at first that researchers should get rid of any prior scientific and professional knowledge (cf. Strübing 2014: 52, 58f). However, this does not mean locking up any scientific knowledge or professional and personal experience, etc. before the analysis, but using them in a considered, conscious way (cf. ibid.: 58f) because they help to provide »the mental capacity to respond to and receive the messages contained in data« (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 33). Instead, both emphasize the relevance of *theoretical sensitivity* within the research process. Sensitivity means staying focused on the data itself —to be able to recognize relevant events, issues, etc. in accordance with the data—rather than subsuming data under predetermined categories (cf. ibid.: 32). Moreover, it means reflecting on and questioning the knowledge, experiences, and biases scientists bring into the analysis (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1996: 56, 2008: 33). Therewith, Strauss and Corbin want to ensure that the production of new knowledge is not limited by an ex-ante theoretical orientation (cf. Strübing 2014: 59) and to prevent imposing our expectations and ideas on the data (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008: 33).

21 However, researchers do not systematically analyze every phenomenon found in the data, instead they have—even more than in open coding—to take decisions on what is important for the research interest (cf. Strübing 2013: 120).

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4.3. Database

The analysis in this study is based on 15 interviews conducted between January and March 2020. All the interviewees are IDPs from (South-)Eastern Ukraine, who fled the armed conflict in their region.[22] In 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counted 1.45 million Ukrainians as internally displaced, most of whom have been living in displacement since the outbreak of armed conflict in 2014 (cf. UNHCR 2021). The number of IDPs increased up to 3.7 million in February 2024 due to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine since 2022, according to the UNHCR (2024). At the same time, not all displaced Ukrainians are officially registered as IDPs, so the number of unreported cases is higher. Due to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine the UNHCR counts 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees globally at the beginning of 2024 (cf. ibid.).

Four interviews were chosen from my database for an in-depth analysis for pragmatic reasons and in order to achieve variance within the analysis as a condition for theoretical saturation. Grounded Theory's *theoretical sampling* approach rejects predetermination because it stresses that there is no empirically substantial prior knowledge about the object of research to reason the selection criteria for sampling, in contrast to statistical sampling. Instead, these criteria are developed in the proceeding analysis (cf. Strübing 2013: 116f). However, the global Covid-19 pandemic and the research interest in IDPs as a vulnerable group limited the theoretical sampling approach. As Grounded Theory is also flexible with regard to sampling (cf. ibid.: 117), my sampling followed a pragmatic approach. More concretely, this meant finding IDPs willing to participate with the help of personal contacts and via snowball sampling and selecting interviews for analysis based on pragmatic reasons, such as the richness of the interviews and variance within the data concerning the research interest. Whereas interviewees I5, I9, and I10 were the most informative ones in my database, interview I3, which was the least informative one, was

22 IDPs are often considered to be refugees, but they do not fall within the international legal definition of a ›refugee‹. The term IDP highlights that a person who was forced to flee one's home remains within the country's borders and, thus, flees within the country.

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chosen as a contrast, in particular for methodological learning purposes (see chapter 4.4).

The interviews were conducted in Russian and translated into English for the analysis. Considering the widespread bilingualism in Ukraine, especially in the south and east, I decided to conduct the interviews in Russian because it was the common language between my interviewees and me as a foreign interviewer.[23]

4.4. Reflections on Methodology and Research Ethics

Retrospectively, choosing both narrative interviewing and Grounded Theory was linked to some difficulties, making modifications to my approach necessary. In this chapter, I will present my reflections on the difficulties faced within the research process, including a discussion of possible explanations and a description of how, in line with my methodological approach and taking research quality into account, I modified my approach to handle the challenges (cf. Schäfer 2023).[24] In this chapter's subsections, I will reflect on challenges concerning my biographical narrative interview approach (4.4.1), the choice of the Russian language for interviewing (4.4.2), and the difficulties of using Grounded Theory for analysis (4.4.3). This chapter ends with a reflection on how I dealt with ethical questions considering research on IDPs as a vulnerable group (4.4.4). Overall, my reflections demonstrate the difference between an ideal-typical understanding of research and the real-typical conduct of research and specific methods.

4.4.1. Reflections on the Narrative Interview Methodology

Overall, the interviewees seem to have had difficulties engaging in the narrative interview format. This becomes visible, firstly, because the nar-

23 This decision will be further reflected on in chapter 4.4.2.

24 A paper on my methodological challenges and handling of them was published at the beginning of 2023; it condenses my reflections.

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ration preamble, the answer to the broad narration stimulus as the first part of the narrative interview, was quite short in all the interviews. Secondly, because the broad narration stimulus invoked uncertainty among the interviewees about what to tell me. This was visible across all the interviews, but it was most prominent with interviewees I5 and I10: Both revealed they had difficulties voicing their thoughts and instead sought to ›change the rules of the game‹ by requesting more precise questions rather than getting involved in the idea of the narrative interview. Due to the flexibility of Grounded Theory and my lack of experience working with narrative interviewing technique, I decided to accommodate my interviewees by continuing with biographical questions that were clearer than the narration stimulus at the beginning, but were still broad enough to set new narrative impetuses without structuring narration too much. Comparing the interviews, it seems that changing the interview format from an open to a more structured one reduced the interviewees' difficulties engaging with the interview, as they made fewer requests for further clarification. In contrast, interviewee I3 continued to have difficulties engaging in the interview, as she continued to ask for further clarification of my questions. Thirdly, most of the interviewees spoke only in a brief, concise, and ›dry‹ manner about their lives, so that the interviews seemed more like reports, that is, verbalizations of written curriculum vitae. This is prominent as the interviewees arranged their narration in line with and around major stages of life, such as school, studies, work, setting up a family and thereby mentioned the years. The following quote illustrates my argumentation:

> I10: »My name is NAME. Well, uh I am from CITY1, Donetsk oblast. Well, and all my life I lived there, up until the last time when we moved to CITY2 because of the conflict. Well, we have been here since 2014 […] I am an entrepreneur. I worked for myself. I had my own business. […] And dealt pretty successfully with this. Well, I think for me it would be easier if you asked me questions and I answered them.«

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At the same time, it seems as if their own experiences were reluctant to come to mind because the interviews consisted less of narrations, as it is usual with narrative interviews, than of descriptions, argumentation and evaluations. Therefore, Schütze's narrative drives and constraints seem to be less effective in this sample, since it rarely happened that the interviewees were able to give in to the narrative flow.

Against this backdrop, the question arises of where their difficulties in engaging in this interview format stem from. First of all, the open interview format may not be that common concerning narrative practices in Ukraine. This seems plausible given that all the interviewees, despite I3, had fewer difficulties after switching from an open to a more structured interview approach. At the same time, interviewees I5, I9, and I10 were more used to a structured interview approach, considering that giving interviews or speaking in public is part of their profession and political commitment.[25]

Moreover, it seems that Soviet socialization still has an influence on narrative practices in Ukraine. It was common in the USSR that one had to prepare and orally present one's autobiography, in the sense of verbalizing one's curriculum vitae, for example in an application process, as Jochen Hellbeck (2009) emphasizes. This self-presentation had to demonstrate one's achievements in life, especially with regard to education and profession, and one's personality as an unfolding subject of Soviet consciousness (cf. ibid.). Furthermore, according to Polly Jones (2018), the publication of biographies, which were of a dry narrative style with strong reference to the development of the Soviet state and the communist party, was an element of state propaganda, which aimed at creating a new socialist image of humankind. Hence, as Hellbeck (2009) concludes, this understanding of ›biography‹ has been the way in which a life could be adequately represented and understood during the Soviet era. This is visible in my interviews, considering how frequently answers were brief, concise, and ›dry‹, and arranged chronologically around specific stages of life, including frequent emphasis on outstanding achievements.

25 This is discussed in detail in chapter 5.8, which focuses on activism.

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I5: »My name is NAME. […] Uh I am forty-one years old; I was born uh in the <1970s> in CITY. […] Next moment, I finished SECONDARY SCHOOL in CITY. Afterwards I studied […] and graduated […] with honors.«

The comparison of my interviews supports the assumption of a link between age as a ›proxy‹ for differences in socialization and one's narrative practices in the sense that the length of the interviews and density of information, including narratives, increase the younger the respondents are.[26] Whereas the interviews with the older respondents were characterized more by a short, concise, and dry report of their life stories, the younger interviewees tended to speak more about their lives, given the richness and density of information. At the same time, the younger interviewees tended to be more open in their answers (e. g. criticizing the government, speaking of difficulties with their partner). This is best illustrated by a comparison between interviewee I3 as the oldest and I9 as the youngest. However, Ukraine's independence has not replaced all former Soviet practices, traditions, norms, etc. from one day to the next, so that Soviet socialization still influences the respondents' narration skills. This becomes prominent in the comparison between both the middle-aged interviewees I5 and I10 and the younger respondent I9, as their interviews are shorter, include less narration and less personal information. Furthermore, whereas interviewee I5 continued to arrange his life history around major stages of life, symbolized by annual figures and the emphasis on achievements, interviewee I9 presented her life history less in such a manner.[27] Consequently, Soviet narration practices still seem to be prevalent, but will most likely fade away with younger generations, as the case of interviewee I9 indicates, considering the length, bounty, and personal character of the narration in her interview.

26 This assumption is based on a broader data basis than of the four interviews analyzed in detail.

27 The aspect of time may have also played a role if the interviewees had expected a short interview—even though the interviewees were told beforehand that the biographical interviews would take time.

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Furthermore, the comparison of my interviews raises the assumption that interviewees are influenced with regard to what extent they are willing to reveal their opinions. This is most prominent in the case of interviewee I3:

I3: »I am worried; this won't be used on any mass media?«

The comparative brevity of her interview and her manner of responding succinctly to questions and asking for further clarification of questions seem to further underpin the aspect of being afraid to say something wrong. Furthermore, some of her statements indicate her focus on answering in a ›politically correct‹ manner:

I3: »I don't know. I don't understand. I am a citizen of this country, and of course, I live here. That's all. And what it means, I don't know. I live and work; my whole life I was working. More than 40 years. I gave my best to work for the good of this country.«[28]

The fear of revealing one's own opinion can be traced back, first, to the significance of taboos in the USSR (cf. Humphrey 2005) and, second, to the use of biographical questionnaires and autobiographies to track down dissidents (cf. Hellbeck 2009). Against this backdrop, Hellbeck (2009: 620) speaks of »biographopolitics«, a specific variant of bio- and population politics, as the Soviet regime recorded and controlled the population in a ›biographical‹ sense. In view of possible repression, it was the safest course of action to reveal as little as possible about oneself. Third, although, the Soviet time has long been over, political repression is still an issue in Ukraine as its democratic transition has been fraught with difficulties since independence. According to a report by Democracy Reporting International (2019), civil society in Ukraine still faces political repression, such as judicial and legislative pressure or violence. Lastly, research shows that conducting interviews with vulnerable groups, such as refugees, is gen-

28 This answer was a response to a question on the meaning of having Ukrainian citizenship.

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erally linked with the difficulty that respondents can be afraid to answer: As Hella von Unger states, hesitating to narrate can be attributed to the respondents' life context, as experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion can be evoked if sensitive information becomes known in the social environment of vulnerable groups (cf. von Unger 2018: 8). Experiences of integration difficulties, acceptance problems among the local population, and discrimination (cf. Goncharuk 2019), like in the case of interviewee I9, who addresses a series of car arson attacks and the risks pro-Ukrainian activists were facing in the city she fled the armed conflict from, illustrate the reality of being afraid to talk openly. Consequently, as a stranger, I seemed to represent a factor of uncertainty and risk, even if I promised data protection and anonymization. In contrast, the youngest respondents I9 and I5 did not have such fears. Because they experienced the USSR only in their childhood years (I9) or early youth (I5), the Soviet influence on their communicative behavior seems to fade away with the younger generations. This is underpinned by their critical assessments of Russia, the USSR, and Ukraine and the fact that both are politically active. At the same time, respondent I9 even stressed having no fear about giving the interview; instead, she viewed it as her mission to enlighten others about the situation in Ukraine. Furthermore, the case of interviewee I9 also reveals how public discourse has changed or is changing in independent Ukraine. For example, she speaks of topics such as the Holodomor (see chapter 5.5 on historical narratives), which has been a taboo during the Soviet time (cf. Simon 2013: 18).

To summarize, Soviet socialization seems to restrain the unfolding of Schütze's narrative drives and constraints in terms of how people tell their life stories and what they tell. This becomes more noticeable the older my interviewees are. In this light, a systematical comparison of how different age groups cope with the narrative interview format would be of benefit for comparative biographical research in Ukraine, especially with regard to changing narration practices.

In addition, trust also plays a role in the interviewees' openness toward narrating about their lives, especially considering that IDPs are a vulnerable group. Concerning field access, contact was established by mutual acquaintances from Karazin University in Kharkiv, the University of Biele-

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feld as well as personal contacts I made myself while living in Kharkiv, who helped to establish contact to IDPs by being my ›sponsors‹ or ›key informants‹ (cf. Breidenstein et al. 2013: 53). Interview I3 clearly shows that a mutual acquaintance is enough for someone to give an interview, but not enough for them to speak freely. This can be explained with von Unger's (2018: 22) observation from a study on refugees that participation does not have to be truly voluntary despite declared consent, for example, when considering a feeling of obligation towards the mutual acquaintance who has facilitated the contact. In contrast, in the cases of interviewees I5 and I10, the difficulties they had engaging in the interview do not indicate a lack of trust in the interviewer, as both were more open to talk after switching to clearer questions, for example, when criticizing the Ukrainian state. With regard to the issue of trust, interviewee I9 sticks out as I met her several times before requesting an interview with her because I found out about her IDP background late. To sum up, familiarity facilitates the interviewing process by increasing trust in the interviewer, when comparing the interviews.[29]

Consequently, one could object that another method, presumably the guided interview format, would have been more purposeful than the narrative interview approach. However, the difficulties do not necessarily indicate that the narrative interview format was the wrong choice. First, my reflections on the interviewees' difficulties in engaging with this interview format are fruitful for working with a biographical approach in post-Soviet states like Ukraine. Second, I see the advantage of the biographical approach in stimulating interviewees to talk and in thereby focusing on the interviewees' subjective relevance with as little external structuring as possible. In this context, clearer but still broadly formulated biographical questions, for example about life stages, can create a bridge between the narrative interview approach and interviewees' difficulties engaging with it. Moreover, it is also possible to deal with skepticism among respondents, as questions evolve during the interviews in relation to what inter-

29 This is also underpinned by another, but unused, interview, where establishing contact was similar to the case of I9. However, due to the difficulties in finding contact to IDPs and the Covid-19 pandemic, I did not really have the chance to build trust for the long term beforehand.

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viewees are willing to talk about. This becomes even more important in the case of delicate issues such as armed conflict or war.

Consequently, in line with the flexibility of Grounded Theory as well as of the narrative interview methodology, it was possible to adjust my approach with regard to the circumstances: By combining the biographical approach of the narrative interview with a more structured interview procedure based on broad, biographical questions, I was able to stimulate the narration potential with as little external structuring as possible. Finally, working with the narrative interview format had a positive impact despite the difficulties: firstly, on my research interest because I was able to focus on the genesis of someone's national belonging from a subjective and processual perspective and, secondly, on my own scientific learning process.

4.4.2. Reflections on the Language Choice within Interviews

If we take the relevance of language for one's own identity into account, research on national belonging in multi-lingual countries should offer respondents the opportunity to answer in their preferred language instead of determining the language a priori as done in my case. Ukrainians do not necessarily speak the same language in a conversation but speak according to their individual preferences due to the widespread (at least passive) bilingualism of the Ukrainian and Russian languages (cf. Wanner 2014: 430). Even though many Ukrainians are fluent in Russian, it makes a difference for respondents in which language they communicate. This is important in the case of respondents who prefer to speak Ukrainian or prefer not to speak Russian at all due to their self-identification as Ukrainian (see chapter 5.3). This is best illustrated by interviewees I5 and I9, who both prefer the Ukrainian language, especially in official settings, but eventually accommodated me in Russian. As some of the interviewees mixed up the languages sometimes, a common practice especially in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, called Surzhyk, having a knowledge of the Ukrainian language would have been an advantage, even with (mainly) Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Hence, further research on this topic should follow a combined linguistic approach to include the relation between one's (ethno-)linguistic affiliation and national belonging.

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4.4.3. Reflections on Grounded Theory Methodology

In terms of quality of research, Strauss and Corbin developed their own set of quality criteria (see overview in Strübing 2014: 89f) for whose achievement a variety of quality-assurance strategies exist, which are an integral part of the methodology, such as *theoretical sampling*, writing *memos*, etc. (cf. Strübing 2014: 84–89). Retrospectively seen, the *iterative–cyclical research process*, *theoretical saturation* and *theoretical sensitivity* were the most challenging aspects of working with Grounded Theory. My research stay was spontaneously terminated ahead of time due to the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic so that the *iterative–cyclical research process* and my *theoretical sampling* could not be implemented completely in line with the methodology.

Moreover, the *theoretical saturation* of my research results can be questioned due to the limitations of this research project, in particular because I could not conduct my research project as planned due to the circumstances of the pandemic. Theoretical saturation means that further data collection and analysis do not produce any new insights or knowledge about the characteristics, dimensions, and variations of categories (cf. ibid.: 32; Corbin and Strauss 2008: 196, 263). Practically, this point is reached when examples of concepts and categories are found repeatedly within the data (cf. Strübing 2014: 32). This is based on the idea of conceptual and not of statistical representativeness: Instead of creating a theory based on quantified answers about a certain population, it means developing preferably comprehensive and sufficiently detailed theories, including explaining the conditions and variation of a phenomenon's occurrence (cf. ibid.: 31f).

Concerning *theoretical sensitivity*, it means staying focused on the data itself—to be able to recognize relevant events, issues, etc. in accordance with the data. Moreover, it means reflecting on and questioning the knowledge, experiences, and subjective biases scientists bring into the analysis to prevent imposing their expectations and ideas on the data (cf. Corbin and Strauss 2008: 32f, Strauss and Corbin 1996: 56). In my case, reviewing literature played an important role in finding the research topic, adjusting the narrative interview format to my research interest, and reflecting on the difficulties of working with the narrative interview format. A further literature review supplemented the analysis process only

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after the first coding cycles to make sure I stayed focused on the data itself and did not analyze the data from a narrow theoretical perspective. Nevertheless, the scientific knowledge gained from my literature review facilitated the process of putting the puzzle pieces together. This is most evident in the fact that the literature review facilitated the interpretation of the data material, for example concerning the ›Holodomor‹ (see chapter 5.5 on historical narratives), and the embedding of the analysis into a broader context to demonstrate the linkages between the personal and the societal levels.

4.4.4. Reflections on Research Ethics

As research on human beings, social research also raises questions about research ethics, considering the social, economic, and legal vulnerability as well as the potential traumatization of certain groups, such as refugees (cf. von Unger 2018) or IDPs in my case. Von Unger emphasizes the significance of ›ethical reflexivity‹ (›ethische Reflexivität‹ in German) within social research to avoid any further harm to respondents, among others with regard to the risk of emotional stress and re-traumatization during the interviews (cf. ibid.: 8). Against this backdrop, I took measures to fulfill my responsibility towards my interviewees.

Firstly, all the interviewees were informed about my research interest, including me as a person, and the background and aim of the research project as well as the method of biographical narrative interviews were explained to them when we first had contact. This information was then repeated at the start of the interview. The use of Russian as common language was intended to help create trust between the interviewees and myself and to make the interview situation more pleasant for the interviewees. However, being Russophone did not necessarily facilitate trust-building between the interviewees and me, considering the role of the Russian language in the conflict over the Donbas (see chapter 5.3) and due to the respondents' need to accommodate me in Russian, even though they preferred to speak in Ukrainian (see chapter 4.4.2). At the same time, my foreign status as a German and a European could have had an impact on the situation, considering the role of Germany and the European Union

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in the conflict over the Donbas, which is not always assessed positively in Ukraine (see chapter 5.7 on foreign policy orientation).

Secondly, in accordance with research ethics, the interviewees were informed about anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntariness of participating when I first contacted them and at the start of the interview. However, the participation of interviewee I3 may have been influenced by a feeling of obligation towards our mutual acquaintance. Nevertheless, I assume that her short interview indicates that she only told me what she was willing to say. Concerning anonymity and data protection, the translation of the interviews was anonymized in order to reduce any harm to the respondents due to the risk of re-identification. More precisely, this meant coarsening or abstracting information and blacking out text or skipping passages within the translation, especially when it was not necessary for the research question. For example, city names were abstracted according to their size. The vagueness of the data material was deliberately weighed against the participants' need for protection concerning their vulnerable situation as IDPs. With regard to the declaration of consent, I chose to use the practice of oral consent rather than of written consent forms. All the interviewees were informed before meeting me and once again before starting the interviews about me, my research topic and purpose, as well as anonymity, data protection, and voluntary participation. The decision to use oral consent was taken in consideration of the use of standardized consent forms, which include sensitive personal data, being contradictory to the high value of anonymity and data protection within social science, especially when researching vulnerable groups (cf. von Unger 2018: 27, 29).

Thirdly, I aimed at avoiding the risk of interviewees re-experiencing traumatic events within the biographical narrative interviews in order to meet my ethical responsibility given the sensitive background of my respondents. Hence, I told my interviewees that the interviews would be about their lives in general and not necessarily about the conflict in order to leave them free to decide whether, to what extent, and in which manner they wanted to address delicate issues such as the conflict. Thereby, I aimed to reduce possible re-traumatization among any respondents not willing to talk about this issue. At the same time, the broad topic aimed at

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avoiding external structuring of their answers with regard to the research question. Additionally, I decided not to insist on the narrative interview format but reacted flexibly to the respondents' needs and wishes by switching to a more structured interview format (see chapter 4.4.1). In cases in which interviewees were willing to speak about the conflict, I followed the principles of active listening and signaled willingness to talk about things that were relevant to the interviewees (cf. Rosenthal 2004: 52). Furthermore, I accommodated the interviewees when choosing the place, the interviews were conducted.

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