



***The Family as a Place of Experiencing
 Critical Events – Case Study***
***Rodzina jako miejsce doświadczania zdarzeń
 krytycznych – studium przypadku***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The main aim is to show the narrative of a woman who experienced critical events in her personal life.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS: 1. How does the narrator describe critical events based on her family experience? 2. What meaning does she ascribe to the events experienced in retrospect? The presented research is situated in the interpretative research tradition. A descriptive-theoretical type of case study was used. Empirical data was collected using Fritz Schütze's narrative interview technique.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The interview began by presenting the narrator's life story from her childhood to the present day. Attention was paid to her understanding of herself and her life, her relationship with her parents, and critical events that occurred in her family. The empirical material was then interpreted based on Schütze's process structures, which revealed her current life course, critical events in the family and landmark events in the narrator's individual biography.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The interpretation of the empirical material showed the narrator in the process of change, internal metamorphoses. It revealed poor intra-family relations, which became the cause of illness, lack of self-acceptance, and depressive and anxious states. The therapy that she underwent, satisfying professional work and mutual feelings of love allowed the narrator to overcome her limitations, weaknesses and take a critical look at the family relationships that were the cause of her pain and suffering.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: The narrative presented in the paper can become a stimulus for change in people who are currently struggling with family problems, illness or suffering: all those people who experience anxiety and loneliness in the space of family life.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **A FAMILY, A CRISIS, A CRITICAL EVENT, AN EXPERIENCE, A NARRATIVE**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Głównym celem jest ukazanie narracji kobiety, która doświadczyła zdarzeń krytycznych w przestrzeni życia rodzinnego.

PROBLEMY I METODY BADAWCZE: Postawiono problemy badawcze: 1. W jaki sposób narratorka opisuje zdarzenia krytyczne na bazie swoich rodzinnych doświadczeń? 2. Jakie znaczenia przypisuje przeżytym zdarzeniom krytycznym z perspektywy czasu? Prezentowane badania usytuowano w interpretatywistycznej tradycji badawczej. Zastosowano opisowo-teoretyczny typ studium przypadku. Dane empiryczne zebrano techniką wywiadu narracyjnego Fritza Schützego.

PROCES WYWODU: Wywód rozpoczęto przedstawieniem historii życia narratorki, poczynwszy od dzieciństwa aż do dnia dzisiejszego. Zwrócono uwagę na sposób rozumienia siebie i swojego życia, relacji z rodzicami, krytycznych zdarzeń, które miały miejsce w przestrzeni życia rodzinnego. Następnie dokonano interpretacji materiału empirycznego na podstawie struktur procesowych Schützego, które odsłoniły dotychczasowy bieg życia, zdarzenia krytyczne w rodzinie, przełomowe wydarzenia w biografii indywidualnej narratorki.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Interpretacja materiału empirycznego ukazała narratorkę w procesie zmian, wewnętrznych przemian. Ujawniła złe relacje wewnątrzrodzinne będące przyczyną wystąpienia choroby, braku akceptacji siebie, wystąpienia stanów depresyjnych, lękowych. Podjęta terapia, satysfakcjonująca praca zawodowa, odwzajemnione uczucie miłości pozwoliło narratorce pokonać ograniczenia, słabości, krytycznie spojrzeć na relacje rodzinne przysparzające bólu i cierpienia.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Przedstawiona w artykule opowieść narracyjna może stać się bodźcem do wprowadzenia zmian u osób, które w chwili obecnej zmagają się z kłopotami rodzinnymi, z trajektorią choroby czy cierpieniem, tych wszystkich, którzy w przestrzeni życia rodzinnego doświadczają poczucia lęku, osamotnienia.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: RODZINA, KRYZYS, ZDARZENIE KRYTYCZNE, DOŚWIADCZENIE, NARRACJA**

Introduction

The discussion in this article revolves around the family, its members and the relationships that develop between them. It focuses on the family as a place where everyday situations are experienced. Those that bring joy and love, as well as those that cause pain and suffering. Thus, important and significant events occur in the family space, forcing individual members to adopt new behaviors or make new decisions. Their occurrence requires making changes, while taking into account personal goals, needs and values.

The concept of a critical life event has been described in Polish literature as a difficult or stressful situation (Teusz, 2002), as a watershed moment that has led to substantial changes in an individual's life. M. John-Borys (1995, p. 14) believes that the experience

of critical events is embedded in human biography. They are an important link in human life, as they enrich our knowledge of feelings, show their variety and intensity, and inform us about our weaknesses and limitations, as well as our potential. Critical events affect the later course of a person's life, opening up new opportunities, and shaping needs and behavior. They can help to modify identity, understood as a sense of continuity of the self and identification with certain social structures (Dobrowolska, 1992).

Considering critical events as turning points in one's biography means that we need to name the problem, and point to the attempts made to resolve it constructively. In such a situation, a person appears as an active, engaged subject who describes his or her experiences, processes and masters the reality in which he or she lives every day.

The narrator's experience, described in the text, brings to light her suffering, illness and weakening relationship with her parents. The critical event prompted her to organize her life, to take a look at the situation she found herself in. This was made possible by structuring a story about herself and her life.

Method and Research Tool

The study described here falls within the tradition of interpretivist research, whose goal is to "understand subjective human experience" (Rubacha, 2004, p. 62). Since qualitative research does not require a representative sample, purposive sampling was used (Bauman, 1998). In this type of research, the individual, the unique and the exceptional become the object of research interest (Szkudlarek, 1997). The objective of this study was to relate the story of a woman who experienced critical events in her family life.

The following research problems were formulated:

1. How does the narrator portray and explain critical events based on her family experience?
2. What meanings does she attribute to the critical events she has experienced in retrospect?

The study also attempts to demonstrate the need to learn from one's biographical experiences (Borowska-Beszta, 2011).

The research design is a case study. The study is part of a qualitative strategy using idiographic explanations. A descriptive and theoretical type of case study was used (Rubacha, 2008). The case study researcher examines meanings, linking them to context and experience (Stake, 2009). Their work thus is reflexive.

The biographical and narrative interview was conducted in the apartment of the narrator.¹ It lasted an hour and a half. The entire interview was recorded and meticulously transcribed. Empirical data were collected using F. Schütze's narrative interview

¹ The place and time of the meeting was determined by the narrator. Responsibility for the course of the study, willingness to be together in one space, empathy, and active listening fostered the creation of stories in an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding.

technique. Reference was made to the main narrative phase, the internal and external questions phase and the balancing phase. A preliminary phase, called narrative prompting, was added to the interview scheme. The question was worded as follows: "Tell about an experience in your family life that was a turning point, a critical moment, a watershed in your life. What happened?" This question encouraged the narrator to tell her own story about herself and her life. In the main stage of the narrative, the researcher took on the role of active listener, accompanying the narrator in her encounter with her life story. This part of the interview revealed the narrator's individual experiences and demonstrated her strategies for coping with crises. After the main narrative stage was completed, we moved on to the stage of internal questions, which referred to the topics that were brought up in the main narrative, and external questions based on the biographical interview questionnaire prepared for the study. The final stage of the interview dealt with the narrator's thoughts on the life she has led so far. This part of the interview was a kind of hiatus in the individual life story, an attempt to look back on events with some critical distance.

The empirical material was interpreted using the following stages: formal analysis of the text, structural description, abstract analysis, knowledge analysis, and contrastive comparison.²

In the formal analysis of the text, the story was divided into thematic parts, or sequences. In the structural description stage, reference was made to four structural processes of the life course: institutional conditions, biographical action plan, and life trajectory. In the final stage of the structural process, I extracted from the narrative story the development of life trajectory potential, a sense of unstable equilibrium, destabilizing factors, the collapse of life organization, attempts to reshape life, and life-changing actions to date (Schütze, 1997). In the abstract analysis stage, the narrator's life was presented in its biographical totality, and in the knowledge analysis, other elements of the story were considered in relation to the narrator's explanations of how her life unfolded. In the contrasting comparison stage, reference was made to minor stories so as not to dismiss them. No comparison was made with another case study, as only one story was interpreted. The synthesis of empirical material was guided by the idea of T. Pilch and T. Bauman (2001, p. 365) that the researcher must reflect on what the phenomena under study say, what the statements bear witness to. These words contributed to the analysis and interpretation of empirical material.

Family Experiences in Monika's Narrative

Monika is a special education teacher. She graduated from the University of Gdańsk and completed postgraduate studies in early childhood education. She currently works

² I discuss the narrative technique of F. Schütze in the monograph *Narracja w pedagogice. Teoria, metodologia, praktyka badawcza* [The narrative in pedagogy: Theory, methodology, research practice] (Krawczyk-Bocian, 2019).

as an elementary school teacher. Monika has a younger brother, with whom she has a very good relationship, and parents. She says the following about her family and her relationship with her loved ones:

I came into the world as the first of my siblings. There was my mom and dad. In the beginning, we lived with my grandfather and with my grandmother who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. I have a feeling that I was the link between my parents, that they were not really together; there was only little Monika. For my mother, I was her beloved daughter. I was more important to her than her husband, and also I was beloved daughter for my dad, who wasn't necessarily able to show it, but there were times when he actually treated me like a princess. The relationship between me and my mom was friendly, like we were good friends. I had a very good rapport with my mother. However, it was definitely not a mother-daughter relationship, but a partner-partner relationship. My mom treated me as a partner, as a friend. As for my dad, I don't remember if I had any relationship with him. Dad may have been at home, but I actually had the feeling as if he wasn't there at all. Usually his presence was limited to lying on the couch and watching TV, or he was simply not there. There were quiet days at home. The arguments happened behind closed doors, usually at night.

Due to family arguments, and strained relations between her parents, the narrator had to take care of her younger brother. They played together and talked to each other, which helped them overcome difficult family experiences. This family bond continues to this day.

I have a brother who is three years younger. We have a very good relationship. I had the impression as a girl that he was not aware of what was going on in our house. And I actually hoped so. Because I was the one who would step into a caretaker role. I hoped that he didn't know anything, didn't suspect anything.

The role of caregiver for her brother, and the loosening of her relationship with her parents has a considerable impact on the formation of Monika's identity. She remembers herself as a reserved, shy and fearful person. The reason for her insecurities was relations inside the family, with the narrator being put in the middle.

I was quiet, shy, I felt I had no say so I didn't ask questions. A timid little sweet girl, a good daughter, who was helpful, and never caused problems. I always listened to others talk about their problems, was very shy, also wary of making friends with other people, groups. I did not speak up in class unless I had to.

The experience of a critical event in family life at the age of fourteen had a significant impact on Monika's self-perception and relationships with other people. Stress and the beginnings of depression contributed to an onset of illness. The narrator's hair, eyebrows and eyelashes fell out.

I was fourteen years old at the time. Yet again my dad came home and had a drink. It was midday. My mother came to me crying because she had discovered pornographic videos

that dad had been watching on the computer. I had discovered the videos much earlier, a few months earlier, and was heartbroken. I didn't tell anyone about it, I had to deal with it myself. There's this image in my head that my mother comes over, it's about 1pm, and asks if I knew about these videos, if I had seen them. I told her that I didn't know if he had seen the videos. My mom asked me that when my dad comes back I should talk to him about it, so that he wouldn't watch those videos again. I did so. I went to his room. I sat down in an armchair and started talking to him. I actually stepped into the shoes of an adult woman, I started asking why he was doing this. My dad didn't say anything. I feel that this was a critical moment for me and feel that this situation should never have happened. About two months after that, my body went on strike. I started having breast leakage, a cyst appeared, and I started going to different doctors. After those two months, my hair started falling out, it started thinning, I started getting bald spots. After two months I no longer had any hair on my head. After six months, I no longer had eyelashes or eyebrows.

The sense of loneliness that the narrator experienced in difficult moments caused her to escape into a state of doubt, passivity.

Usually in difficult moments I would lie down and do nothing. That's how it was in the beginning. Then I gorged on sweets, which made me happy. Because of this, I gained weight and lost my confidence, my self-worth. I also sought refuge in TV series. TV shows were becoming my life. I was vicariously involved in the lives of the characters in the series. I felt like I existed, that something was happening.

Poor relationships with her parents and peers, and a sense of inferiority caused Monika to avoid people, and to struggle to accept her appearance. Comments and remarks from her peers added to the stress and consequently led her to close in on herself.

I absolutely did not accept myself, I did not allow anyone to take pictures of me. I felt ugly, horrible, unwanted by everyone. I felt like a monster that everyone reacts strangely to. Disgusting and hideous. I think it wasn't really me who created this image of myself, but the people around me.

The disease triggered a sense of loneliness and depressive states in the narrator. It made her realize that at this point in her life she had only one person from whom she could receive support.

I had no one. I think I wasn't coping at first. That was the first step to depression. This condition dragged on for so long, until finally my psyche cracked and I was simply unable to function normally. Life seemed pointless to me. I didn't want to live. I had all kinds of thoughts. I thought about what it would be like if I was gone. Along with depression, I also saw who was close to me. It turned out that there were really not many of these people. I could even say that at that moment it was one person. It was a friend of mine in high school.

Therapy for adult children of alcoholics proved to be a turning point.

I found an external motivator, which was therapy for adult children of alcoholics. My friend and I went together. If it hadn't been for her, I probably wouldn't have gone. It turned out that there were free places, that it was therapy for free, group therapy. This therapy gave me confidence, assertiveness, the ability to talk to people, and self-worth. Thanks to therapy, I don't let people take advantage of me, I put myself in the role of a daughter, not a mother.

Graduating from college, undergoing therapy, trying to cut herself off from family problems, and entering into a relationship brought the narrator closer to God, with whom she sought contact during difficult times in her life.

First of all, I think that I am religious thanks to this event. Had it not been for my illness and the situation at home, I don't know if I would have turned to God. I don't know if I would be so close to God. Thanks to this, I am a practicing Catholic. I don't only go to Church on Sundays, but also to parish retreats. On a daily basis, I seek contact with God. I often talk to him during the day. I also see him at different moments in my life.

The narrator is convinced that the critical events she experienced in her family life, as well as her struggle with illness, allowed her to understand the meaning of her life.

I know for sure that this has shaped me a lot. I wouldn't be the person I am today if I hadn't experienced this. If my hair hadn't fallen out, if my dad hadn't left us, if he hadn't been drinking. I think that made me empathetic, kind, that I can be good and caring. I can understand people with problems. I look at everyone as someone who has some experiences, who acts in this way and not another way, because something happened in their life.

The time of disappointment with her appearance and attempts to understand the events she experienced triggered the narrator's need to change her life. Her graduation from college, taking up her dream job and entering into an intimate relationship proves that Monika is building her self-image in retrospect. She pays attention to the conceptual category of goodness and love of life. She sees where the changes, internal transformations should take her in the process of understanding herself.

I would say that good comes first in life. But there should also be a proper hierarchy in what comes first. That is, loved ones, God, and then the rest. Not to focus on work, on money. For me, the value is people first and foremost, and the time spent with them.

Monika's reflection turns her thoughts to the near future. Starting a family and the plans associated with it are the high point for her.

I am in a relationship and this man I am with now is radically different from the one I was with before. I can say that I am happy now. I am truly hoping to start a family. This is the man I have always dreamed of, always wanted to have. Most of all, I see how he treats me. I didn't know that it was possible to be so happy in a relationship, I didn't know that I could be respected and treated in such a way.

Another future task the narrator has set for herself is to leave the family home and start an independent life. The issue of improving her relationship with her mother is also important for her. The course of change and her plans for the near future have been laid out.

Interpretation of Empirical Material

Monika's story focuses attention on the experience of critical events in her family life. The gradual build-up of trajectory potential leads to difficulties in communicating feelings in her family, with all family members drifting apart from one another. The description of the critical event is dominated by an illness, which aggravates the narrator's sadness and bitterness. Going through outbursts of anger, rebellion and non-acceptance of the illness she asks the question: "Why did this happen to me?" ("It was the time when I was rebelling," "It's the time when I'm depressed, when I can't cope with my life").

Negative self-image led to loneliness ("I was isolating myself, too, distancing myself, not letting people get to know me better"). Not having a clear goal and becoming withdrawn exacerbated her depression. Poor relationships with peers and loosening family ties were signs that the narrator was suffering. She describes her surrender to the sad reality of everyday life ("I've always associated it with toilet paper, this reality of mine is long, gray"), negative emotions and hostile attitudes towards herself and others. The narrator's behavior led her to retreat from family and social life, to slowly shut out the world around her. According to Schütze, there is a stage of destabilization and a breakdown in the organization of daily life ("I was vicariously involved in the lives of the characters in the series. I felt like I existed, that something was happening").

Then, seeking support from a friend and starting therapy become a reason for her to ask fundamental questions about the meaning of life. The narrator ponders the causes of her anxiety, stress and withdrawal. She attempts to name the things she has experienced. Schütze calls this stage the first efforts at working on life. The narrator describes the critical event as a breakthrough that leads her to accept her appearance, to name her relationship with her parents as a sign of change. She goes from being shy and withdrawn to opening up to the world and to others ("It amazes me how much I've changed. I was a timid girl, so docile, always doing what I was told, and now what a woman I've become").

The reflection on her life highlights the essence of understanding what she participated in. Participation in the story being created made it possible for her to define herself as an individual inhabiting a world of meaning. As one who is becoming, rather than finished, completed (Teusz, 2010, p. 155). The effort she took to understand critical events allowed the narrator to escape the trajectory of suffering. In her words "I want to continue working on myself to be a better person." The attempts she made to reach out to people and interact with them helped her overcome her shyness and fear of being judged on her appearance. With self-acceptance came the closure of the stage of bitterness and sadness associated with the disease.

Looking at oneself through the perspective of past experiences became a source of knowledge both about oneself and the surrounding world. There is a self-awareness and empathy in the narrator's life, which is expressed in sensitivity to the fate and lives of others ("I spend time with the children, with my pupils, who reciprocate what I give them, that is, love, affection"). Also noteworthy is her willingness to reach out to people, to spend time in an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual kindness. Thus, being aware of her self, the narrator is able to talk candidly to her mother, to express her objection to mistreatment. The narrator takes her fate into her own hands, and orients her life toward the future.

The reflection that follows becomes her ally in understanding life experiences.

This is undoubtedly true when the narrator tries to understand her father's new situation in life, and accepts his new family ("I learned that I have a little brother and sister"). The realization of herself in the process of education, finding out about a new love made the narrator aware of the course of her actions.

The path of Monika's biographical experiences, as shown in the narrative, led through downfalls and passivity to joy and satisfaction with life. This is clearly a process of transition to higher levels of self-development, in which planning a vision of the future is crucial. This means an individual biographical plan, featuring the narrator's clear goals. In Monika's narrative, this concerns two areas: family and professional life. In the private life, it is the desire to start a family and have children, while in terms of professional life it is further education and professional development. The narrator stressed the aspect of being able to participate in the creation of the story. Aware of the experiences and lessons learned in her family home, of the attempts she made to narrate her individual life story, she sees the story as a state of inner purification ("I feel purified in some way, fulfilled, so to speak. I'm happy that I could tell the whole story of my life to someone").

The effort to integrate different areas of life suggests that the narrator felt the need to creatively construct her world, transform it, adapt it to her own needs and desires. The unleashed inner motivation to understand biographically significant events allowed the narrator to befriend herself, to recognize the role of significant others, and to discover life in all its dimensions. In the words of P. Oleś, "stories can be complicated, and the vicissitudes of life seem to lead from a foggy past, towards an unknown future" (2004, p. 195). Monika's life story certainly supports this statement.

Monika's biographical narrative exposed critical events in her family. It revealed conflicts within the family, which caused her suffering, loneliness, illness, and rejection by peers. The attempts to name, describe the difficult situations in the family are an expression of the narrator's need to give meaning to the events in her individual biography ("I began to see who I was, I began to learn about myself, I felt happier in spite of everything").

Returning to Pilch's and Bauman's suggestion that the researcher needs to observe (during the collection of empirical material) various, minutest events, we should note the narrator's need to interpret the course of her own life.

The words that she emphasized during the story: *always, I dreamed, I wanted to have, I wished* demonstrate the need to build a life story based on reflection. This

is unquestionably the realization that “participating in the story of life is an amazing discovery”³ as Monica stressed when concluding the narrative.

Storytelling, therefore, is a human need to talk about what he or she is experiencing (has experienced) in the space of the world around him or her. Following difficult, critical as well as joyful events in a story opens up a space to meet oneself.

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³ I refer the reader to the monograph *Homo narrator* (Krawczyk-Bocian, 2021), in which I describe the role of the narrator in metaphorical terms.

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