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Life story interviewing as research method in Social Communication. The case of women journalists in San José de Cúcuta (Colombia)

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Abstract

Introduction: This article, which is the result of the research project titled “Women journalists, opinion leaders in San José de Cúcuta”, aims to implement the life story interview as a research method in Social Communication. **Methods:** The study is exploratory in nature and is based on in-depth interviews with six women journalists from local news media. The interviews contained 120 questions, divided in seven aspects: 1) Family and personal life; 2) Education; 3) Beginning of work life; 4) Exercise of the profession; 5) Opinion leaders; 6) Female opinion leaders and 7) Gender mainstreaming in Journalism. **Results:** The application of the selected method allowed us to approach the practices and routines of the female interviewees, identifying attitudes, roles and transformations in their exercise of journalism. **Conclusions and discussion:** The life story interview constitutes a methodological alternative for Social Communication and allows us to understand the problems of the border area from the perspective of communication.

Keywords

Life story interview; methodology; social communication, border area.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
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1. Introduction

Based on the research project titled “Women journalists, opinion leaders in San José de Cúcuta”, this article analyses the viability of the application of life story interview as a research method in Social Communication. Although this method departs from the research tradition in this field, where quantitative media content analysis dominates (Martínez & Saperas, 2016), it allows us to identify the attitudes, roles and transformations in the work routines of the sample of women journalists, as a result of the social, political, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in the border areas.

In-depth interviews were conducted with six (6) women journalists working for local media with national coverage. The interviews were structured around seven (7) aspects that took into account interviewees’ private and professional life. The 120-item instrument allowed us to answer such questions as: Do women journalists see themselves as opinion leaders in the region? Did they achieve these positions in the media through their journalistic exercise? Do they perpetuate gender inequality in their journalistic work? And Do they generate journalistic content that promotes equal rights and equality between men and women?

The interview was used to approach these women journalists who report on the border area and whose social, cultural, economic, and political dynamics have changed since the main crossing point was closed by the Government of Venezuela in August 2015.

San José de Cúcuta, capital of Norte de Santander, is the Colombian city where six (6) women live and exercise their journalistic profession. It is a border city that for decades was recognised as the most important in the country and was considered “the most dynamic border in Latin America”, due to its commercial exchange, mobility of people, exports and geographical location.

The situation of the border, after its closure and subsequent opening for the humanitarian influx of December 2015, led journalism in the region to focus, fundamentally, on the reporting of the daily lives of returnees, *migrants* [1], and the people who are affected by a situation that alters the way of acting, living, working and coexisting in the border city of San José Cúcuta (Colombia).

Women journalists narrated how they got started in their profession, how they built their life project and how they decided to work for the local media. In addition, they reported that they have been censored by public forces. In their life stories, they recognised their skills, talked about the ways in which they establish relationships and share information in the media where they work, about their leadership in the region and about the scarce gender mainstreaming in their journalistic work.

2. Methods

To carry out this exploratory research study, we used the life story interview method. Although this method has been used in sociology and anthropology, we should indicate that its use here aims to demonstrate that it is appropriate for Social Communication studies and analyses, and in particular to determine approaches to the everyday problems and work of journalists in a given environment.

One of the most significant works that rely on the life story method is the one carried out by Ferraroti (2007), who not only addresses issues related to the use of this method, but also its epistemological discussion. Life stories as text, became a perfectly defined field or area. In that sense, it is defined as “something that has been lived: with an origin and a development, with progressions and regressions, with very precise contours, with figures and their meaning” (Ferratori, 2007, p.28).

Ferraroti also proposes a metaphor for the interpretation of the life story: it is entering the text, that is, not only reading it to obtain information, but inhabiting it. Being immersed, inside and not on the edge, also becomes the contraption of the life story as a method, inasmuch as it allows us to know as much of the subject under study as of the one who studies it. “This means that research is conceived as a co-research and that every researcher, far from hiding behind a pre-built methodological weapon, is also ‘investigated’” (Ferratori, 2007, p.26).

Faced with the problems of the method, Ferratori insists that it involves other complexities beyond the statistical organisation of pre-coded answers and is oriented to the creation of relationships of trust between interviewer and interviewee, since no one would tell each other their lived experiences in a spontaneous way.

Charriez Cordero (2012) has analysed twelve (12) definitions of life story method and concludes that the most common is that of an *account*, which is sometimes accompanied by the adjective *extended*. He points out that the terms narration, enunciation, memory and text are less frequently mentioned. “The life story is the way a person makes a profound account of his or her experiences based on his or her interpretation and the meaning generated from his or her social interaction” (Charriez Cordero, 2012, p.53). At that point, the author is consistent with the ideas of Blumer (1969), who points out that humans act according to the meanings they assign to things or events.

The life story registers those life events that are interpreted according to the meaning of the phenomena and experiences that people live, based on what they have perceived as a way to appreciate their own life, their world, their selves, and their social reality (Charriez Cordero, 2012, p.53).

2.1. Population and sample

For the application of the method, we selected six (6) women journalists who worked in the local media, particularly those who occupied management positions in radio or television networks with national coverage and/or were correspondents for these media or were editors of digital news media and had become, due to their work, opinion leaders in the region.

2.2. Data collection instruments and procedure

To carry out this research, we used the in-depth interview technique and direct observation. In addition, 120 questions were prepared and divided into seven (7) moments or aspects: 1) Family and personal life; 2) Education; 3) Beginning of work life; 4) Exercise of the profession; 5) Opinion leaders; 6) Female opinion leaders and 7) Gender mainstreaming in Journalism.

The in-depth interview technique, as a qualitative method, seeks to capture such a process of interpretation, seeing things from the perspective of interviewees, who are continually interpreting and defining themselves in different situations. This technique consists of conducting an unstructured personal interview, whose main objective is to investigate, in a comprehensive manner, a person, so that he or she feels comfortable and free to express, with details, his or her beliefs, attitudes and feelings about a subject under study. It is mainly used in exploratory research, especially in studies where the research problem is related to confidential, delicate or embarrassing aspects, or when peer pressure may affect the answers of the interviewee. Likewise, it constitutes an indispensable tool in qualitative studies where time constraints of interviewees and the topics addressed require it.

The 120-question instrument allowed us to address dissimilar questions among women journalists, such as: Do you consider yourself an opinion leader in your region? Did you reach your position in the media thanks to your journalistic work? Do you perpetuate gender inequality in your journalistic work? or Do you generate content that promotes equal rights and equality between men and women?

Having defined the aspects and objectives of the interview, the questions allowed us to establish whether, in the exercise of their profession, women journalists consider themselves opinion leaders in San José de Cúcuta, and to review how they grew professionally in the media.

The aspects objectives and questions of the interview are detailed in the following table:

Table 1. Aspects, objectives and related questions of the interview

<i>Aspects</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Questions</i>
1. Family and personal life	Identify the reasons that led women journalists to follow journalism as a life project	Questions related to their teenage years, school life, family relationships and journalism.
2. Education	Determine the relationship between the expectations about being a social communicator and/or journalist and the reality of academic and work life	Questions related to university education and academic training in other areas and arrival in journalism.
3. Beginning of work life	Characterise the beginning of the professional life of women social	Questions related to their beginnings as a journalist, the first years of their professional life.

	communicators and/or journalists.	
4. Exercise of the profession	Describe the current situation in their exercise as journalists.	Questions related to their current job and the personal and work situations that affect them.
5. Opinion leaders	Determine the conditions that have turned these women into opinion leaders	Questions related to the leadership that they currently enjoy.
6. Female opinion leaders	Establish the leadership of women journalists from their perspective.	Questions related to being opinion leaders and gender mainstreaming in their journalistic activity.
7. Gender mainstreaming in Journalism	Identify the existence of gender mainstreaming in their journalistic coverage.	Questions related to gender equality and its treatment in journalistic coverage

Source: Authors' own creation.

The interviewed women journalists occupy management positions in local media or are correspondents for national news media, or work for influential digital news media in the area object of study:

Table 2. Interviewed women journalists and their media employers

Name	Position
Esmeralda Rojas	Director of radio news programme <i>Caracol</i>
Olga Lucía Cotamo	Director of radio news programme <i>RCN</i>
Estefanía Colmenares	Editor of <i>La Opinión</i>
Julieth Cano	Correspondent for <i>Caracol TV</i>
Mary Stapper	Editor of digital magazine <i>Somos La Revista</i>
Martha Posada	Journalist in digital news outlet <i>Así es Cúcuta</i>

Source: Authors' own creation.

Faced with the use of the selected method, it is necessary to point out that finding a space in the agenda of women journalists was a costly process, due to the fact that they direct media companies and are involved in the gathering of sources, the presentation of news and the guiding of the daily broadcast of news programmes. Added to this, they work in a border area, where they have to give coverage to the situations that constantly arise there since the closure of the main crossing point, which fills up their agenda.

It was important to know, in advance, the availability of women journalists to provide the required information, since there are aspects of their family and personal life that are important to know to identify the aspects that led them to this profession and/or to undertake a journalism degree.

3. Context: closure of the border, women and journalism

San José de Cúcuta is the capital of Norte de Santander department. It is located in the northeast of Colombia and borders with Táchira state, Venezuela. It is the most important border city in the country, and for decades it was considered the most dynamic border in Latin America, given the commercial exchange. According to data from the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE for its acronym in Spanish) and the Directorate of National Taxes and Customs (DIAN) of Colombia, exports to Venezuela stood at 1,969 million USD in 2014, which is 12.7% lower than in 2013. On the other hand, the bilateral trade exchange also decreased 10.5%, going from 2,687 million USD in 2013 to 2,404 million USD in 2012.

However, its privileged geographic position has been in conflict many times for the decisions made by the governments of both Venezuela and Colombia. In a report financed by the central bank of the Republic of Colombia, titled “Crisis on the border”, Andrés Sánchez Jabba explains that, since the dissolution of Gran Colombia to the signing of the delimitation treaty in 1941, freedom and self-determination developed at a rapid pace, due largely to the gradual process of institutionalisation and the limited presence of both the Colombian and Venezuelan states in border area (Sánchez, 2014).

This situation allowed the population to ignore the border limits and to circulate and trade freely, as if the two nations shared the same region and, of course, the same evils. This freedom, which almost legitimated and led to a continuous transit for more than 50 years, changed in 2015, when Venezuela’s President, Nicolás Maduro decided to close the border following an attack on Venezuelan soldiers. This temporary measure lasted 72 hours and triggered a series of situations that began to show the reality of the country. Likewise, as stated in the 2017 report on the border areas (2017) written by the Venezuelan Department of Protection of Citizens’ Rights, the country denounces the contraband and criminality that exists in the border area, which has led to the deportation of 1,950 undocumented Colombians living in Venezuela (*Defensoría del Pueblo*, 2017).

According to a report published in the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* (2015), taken from the international news agency El Nacional-Venezuela/GDA and AFP, this measure has an undertone in which they expose:

Maduro’s denunciation comes at a time when his country faces a shortage of at least two-thirds of its basic products, a phenomenon that analysts attribute to the tight control of prices and a drought in foreign exchange due to the fall in oil prices, which generates 96% of the dollars of this country, which is highly dependent on imports. In addition, by the end of 2014 inflation was close to 70% (last official data), but according to experts it had already exceeded three digits. This has sharpened the depreciation of the bolivar, subject to four exchange rates, of which the parallel is 110 times higher than the official rate of 6.3 bolivars per dollar (AFP, 2015).

This situation ended up revealing that Venezuela had difficulties, not only economic, but also political and social. The panorama the population of the border area had to face since August 2015 had an impact on their everyday life dynamics, because the closure affected their work, which depended on the trade and transit that took place between the two nations without restrictions, which affected the

children, young people and adults living in San Antonio, Táchira state (Venezuela), but studied and worked in San José de Cúcuta, Norte de Santander (Colombia). This situation also occurred in reverse and totally disrupted the life of these people who were residents of this area and ended up becoming returnees and migrants.

That same year and faced with this situation, the Colombian government worked with institutional organisations to generate a humanitarian corridor, which would provide a solution to the health, education, security, and economy problems affecting the population of the area, especially the Colombians residing in Venezuela. This initiative was undertaken by the departmental administration of Norte de Santander, which generated dialogues with its counterpart from the Táchira state, in order to come up with solutions to this situation. The conversations between the Colombian and Venezuelan chancelleries and presidents led to the first agreement. In July 2016, the humanitarian corridor was established and allowed the transit of 30 thousand people, according to data provided by Colombia's Migration Department. Given the results, a second step was taken to increase the figure to 110 thousand people, between Venezuelans and Colombians, who sought to stock up on food, cleaning supplies, medicines and automotive parts, as well as visiting their families.

The humanitarian corridor was not opened completely and continues to have time restrictions, but the pressure generated by Venezuelan women's group "*Ladies in white*" (*Damas de blanco*) provided more opportunities for exchange and the generation of national working groups on issues such as contraband, exchange system, health, hydrocarbons, commerce, education and security.

Meanwhile, and faced with the exercise of journalism and women in journalism, Reporters Without Borders has ranked Colombia as the Latin American country with the largest number of journalists killed since 2000, just after Mexico, according to a report published in 2014 by the Spanish newspaper *El País*.

Although the homicide rate for journalists in Colombia has decreased in relation to the report published by Reporters Without Borders in 2002, *El Tiempo* newspaper published a report that showed the increase in aggressions and threats to journalists. The exercise of journalism in Colombia continues to be a high-risk profession due to the constant abuses, censorship and intimidation suffered by women journalists, according to the report published by the Foundation for Freedom of the Press and made between 2006 and 2014.

Henry Orozco's essay, published in April 2017 in *El Espectador* newspaper, Colombia's second most important newspaper, points out that:

In Colombia, as in many Latin American countries, journalism has often been subjected to oppression, censorship, intimidation, and in the worst case, death. Writing, as a journalistic manifestation, is an undervalued exercise, in which, sometimes, journalists themselves have denigrated the profession, with their lack of commitment and ethics towards the profession: corroborate the source and contrast it. (Orozco, 2017).

Carreño and Guarín (2008) examined the exercise of journalism by Colombian women in the international and national arenas and highlighted that the presence of women in the media was very

limited, according to the report published in 2005 by the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Malta and based on the analysis of 13 thousand radio, press and television journalistic stories from 76 countries:

The results indicated that just in radio and television the representation of women equalled or exceeded the male presence (61% in radio and 75% in television), while political and government issues generally excluded the female journalists (Carreño & Guarín, 2008, p.19).

Other studies warn about the low presence of women in the media and their minimal access to managerial positions. In 2001, the US National Newspaper Publishers Association conducted a census in newsrooms and found that only 34% of managers were women, of whom African-American women only represented 3% (Carreño & Guarín, 2008, p.19). Likewise, women journalists have faced different circumstances that violate their rights and have access to fewer spaces to work, which puts them at a disadvantage because they are conceived as having lower intellectual capacities to manage information.

Regarding work inequality, there are areas of journalistic coverage that have been traditionally less accessible for women. The first corresponds to war journalism that, although has been represented by great female reporters like the Italian Oriana Fallaci, presents the disadvantage of the greater vulnerability of women as possible victims of sexual abuse, among others. The second area is sports journalism, where women only began to emerge, but face a lot of resistance since men have always dominated inside and outside the court (Carreño & Guarín, 2008, p.20).

With regards to harassment, women journalists who work in male-dominated environments are more vulnerable. In Colombia, for example, the case of journalist Jineith Bedoya was made public by herself: she was tortured, raped and kidnapped by paramilitaries on 25 May 2000. This not only proves the harassment suffered by women, but also the vulnerability and danger to which they are exposed in their profession.

4. Results

The analysis of the life story interviews carried out as part of the project “Women journalists, opinion leaders in San José de Cúcuta”, indicates that despite occupying management positions in the media, women journalists still continue to be judged and censored in their daily work activities.

The popular perception of women as journalist continues to affect them, since it considers that women cannot perform as good as men do. For example, women journalists were not part of the coverage of law enforcement and political news, a section with a large audience, since media companies considered that women do not have the capacity to deal with such sources. In addition, women journalists have been victims of constant aggressions when conducting interviews, only for being women, and victims of harassment when they receive information, which is sometimes conditioned by the courtship of the interviewee.

In their life stories, women journalists indicated that there were several moments in their childhood, in their family life and during their secondary education that influenced their decision to choose journalism as their professional life project.

Once their undergraduate studies started, the interviewed journalists participated in internship programmes that helped them to enter their working environment, where they were sometimes discriminated against for being women, and were assigned to cover risk-free sources. In this regard, Estefania Colmenares, deputy editor of *La Opinión* newspaper, narrated that in her first job in Bogotá for *El Tiempo* newspaper, she was only able to cover the issue of mobility and from there it was difficult to get assigned another space, so remained doing this activity for around three years.

At the time of describing their practice as journalists, the interviewees stated that they first had to go through several media outlets, to obtain the experience that allowed them to be promoted to the managerial positions that they occupy today, and in which they must lead with male-predominant work teams.

Although their bosses are men, women journalists have been able to propose and address political and judicial issues, where their relationship with government agencies and the public force has been censored through news framing. “I cover the government of Norte de Santander, politics and law enforcement. Yes, recently with the Army for the handling of the news and issues of law enforcement especially in this region that has a more violent area, I got a call from the major of the 30th brigade; it was almost censorship” (Esmeralda Rojas, Editor of Noticias Caracol Radio).

The interviewees consider that the reporting of news related to the private sector is also censored, as there are officials who do not give interviews, nor give information to complement the news story. “One time, the manager of *Aguas Kpital* [the water and sewer supplies management department of Cúcuta] tried to hide something, so the press officer told us: please do not attack the manager too much. In that press conference I told him: ‘why are you hiding the information? Tell us!’. I was new, I was just beginning in the media. He turned around and said: ‘she is a newbie and comes here giving orders’... but then said: ‘calm down!’ So, I explained to him that my tone of voice is strong” (Marta Posada, Director of *Asíescúcuta* station and website).

Women journalists reveal that the coverage of sources and news events related to law enforcement is complicated by the actors involved, but that they have been able to make the news in their professional practice and have carried out investigative journalism on corruption. “I like to go out to the streets to look for the sources. A specific issue that I cover and monitor in government is law enforcement due to the situation in the region. I have conducted political and law enforcement investigations related to Catatumbo [2]; getting access to this type of information is difficult (even traveling to the area is complex), but when you are there, you feel afraid because of the situation in the area” (Esmeralda Rojas, Director of Noticias Caracol Radio).

They also state that there are other media platforms that have allowed them to inform in a more rapid and direct way, such as social networks, which are personal and enable public debate, encourage audiences to participate in specific issues in gender and equality.

Likewise, they also recognise that in the media they direct they have adopted a positioning that allows them to be consulted and followed by their audiences for the information treatment they offer in their professional practice.

As for whether they see themselves as opinion leaders, the interviewees mention that in the news media companies they work for they have carried out investigations to report abuse and the many situations that Cúcuta faces: *“I consider myself an opinion leader because I have been a bridge between the community and the institutions to find solutions to the problems that exist in a certain population”* (Julieth Cano, correspondent for Blue Radio).

The treatment of information on equality and gender in the city of Cúcuta, which is based on the guidelines issued by the journalistic companies, becomes complex since their agenda does not include the coverage of these issues.

In relation to women’s empowerment in the management of different media companies in the city of San José de Cúcuta, the interviewees recognise that it has been changing, and that several years ago they were led by men and there was very little participation of women.

The application of the in-depth interviews and direct observation in the fieldwork made it clear that the life story method allows the researcher to investigate different aspects of life and work of women journalists.

As a result of this research, it is necessary to indicate that the theoretical preparation phase is important because it allows us to define the main objectives. If this is not done properly, the extracted information may not be useful for the research objectives.

The methodological reflections indicate that the life story method belongs to a tradition that looks for non-quantitative alternatives to research in Social Communication.

The life story is a method to get to know a person (male or female) and understand his or her interests, preferences, feelings and social and human interactions.

The narration and reflection on experiences enable the encounter between the time of the subject and the time of the world, between the finitude of personal life and the infinity of social human history. It allows identifying the relationship between reality and fantasy, where the imaginary is perceived as real, as a universe of symbols and representations that, when translated into language, give proof of their existence. Different times and spaces are present in the life story (Puyana, 1994, p. 188).

Finally, and according to Díaz Larragaña (1999), it is necessary to clarify that there are important differences between biographical methods, given that life story and life history are not the same thing, even though they seem to be the same technique. The life story is used to study a certain person, includes his or her own story, and complements the analysis with other documents or narrations, and is based on descriptions and broad narrations of the life of the interviewee; what matters here is the whole, since there is a chronological order that is usually respected.

The life story method also differs from the testimony technique, since the former takes “the individual as a participant or observer of an event” (Díaz Larragaña, 1999, p.2); it also differs from the biographical interview and oral history, since the latter is based on the analysis of oral sources in historical research.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The life story is a method that allows the researcher to approach the practices and routines of the journalist, identifying processes and procedures the latter undertakes to obtain and treat the information, which is frequently studied by means of quantitative analysis. Likewise, it helps the researcher to understand the subject under study and avoid the judgments that are usually made against women journalists in relation to their practices.

The research indicates that the six (6) women on whom the life story method was applied are permeated by a personal, social and family life that affects their work life and their work itself, especially if we consider the particularities of the closure and subsequent opening (although restricted and controlled) of the border crossing between the governments of Colombia and Venezuela in 2015.

The research made it possible to identify attitudes, roles and the transformations of the work of the women journalists selected for the study, as a result of the social, political, economic and cultural changes that took place in the border areas. Precisely, the situation of the border, after its closure and subsequent opening for the humanitarian corridor, has led the journalism in the region to focus, fundamentally, on the reporting of news related to this situation and, in particular, on the problems faced by *migrants* and people whose ways of living, acting, working and coexisting in the border city of San José de Cúcuta (Colombia) have been affected.

The research suggests that the interviewed women journalists have not received training on gender issues to be able to treat them in a particular way. They only use their personal social networks at times to promote or support certain situations related to gender equality. These results confirm that in the exercise of their profession, women journalists face gender inequalities, as well as professional responsibilities, in terms of salaries and credibility.

Life stories constitute an alternative method for Social Communication and to understand the problems of the border area from the perspective of communication. Its application allows us to argue that qualitative methods are also objective and that it is possible to appeal to more than statistical information as a sole determinant or criterion of validity for research in this area of knowledge.

The use of the life story method for research in Social Communication also makes it possible to obtain precise data and establish the life moments to be addressed from the perspective of the subject of study.

The relevance of the method is strengthened with the construction of the instrument for the collection of information, which in this case was an in-depth interview, which allowed us to approach the lives of journalists in their different roles in a holistic way, thanks to the definition of the seven (7) selected life moments.

The narrative that is used in the development of the life stories becomes specific and widens according to each of the moments and spaces that are shared with the interviewee, which leads us to find in the stories detailed information that serves as a contribution for other research studies.

As a method, the life story is a dynamic narrative that presents various forms for its construction and requires a prior documentation of the object of study and an exploratory approach, in order to avoid wasting time and invalid information. In addition, it opened the possibility of constructing methodological approaches to recognise and interpret the border men and women from the communicative perspective, since they have already been studied from the perspective of other areas of knowledge and, in particular, statistics.

6. Notes

1. This term began to be used after the closure of the main border crossing, because the citizen living in the region has been historically considered as Colombian-Venezuelan and having a free transit between both countries. In fact, most of them have citizenship certificates from each country that for years have allowed them to identify themselves as Colombian or Venezuelan, depending on their needs.

2. Catatumbo is a Colombian subregion, located in the northeast of the Norte de Santander department, which extends across the Eastern Cordillera of Colombia and Lake Maracaibo, and for this reason it has been considered as “cross-border”. In Colombia, this region is made up of 11 municipalities: Ábrego, Convención, El Carmen, El Tarra, Hacarí, La Playa, Ocaña, San Calixto, Sardinata, Teorama and Tibú and is the scene of conflicts between the armed actors of both countries.

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