

## Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis is analysis of a chronologically-told story, with a focus on how elements are sequenced. The analysis also asks why some elements are evaluated differently from others, and how the past shapes perceptions of the present. Narrative analysis is an in-depth qualitative technique.

### Narrative

Narratives or stories occur when one or more speakers engage in recounting an experience or event. Typically, the telling of a story occupies multiple turns in the course of a conversation. Narrative analysis takes the story as the investigative focus.

Narratives or stories may:

- be spoken or written
- be elicited during an interview, or naturally-occurring
- be short or long
- be told to share one's life story
- focus on events and the meaning of those events for those experiencing them
- focus on the ordinary stories people tell as a way to share everyday experiences.

Labov and Waletzky's (1967) work distinguishes 6 basic elements of storytelling:

1. Abstract - How does it begin? What is it all about?
2. Orientation - Who/what does it involve, and when/where?
3. Complicating Action - Then what happened?
4. Evaluation - So what?
5. Resolution - What finally happened?
6. Coda - What does it all mean?

Studying this structure helps to understand how people encode information about the world on a personal level. There are a wide range of ways to view and analyse stories or narratives.

### Narrative Inquiry

(Based on: Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)

#### INTRODUCTION

Narrative inquiry is a means by which we systematically gather, analyse, and represent people's stories as told by them. Narrative inquiry captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context. Narrative researchers collect data about people's lives and construct a narrative about their experiences and meanings they contribute to those experiences. Narrative researchers believe that humans live out stories, are told stories, and are story-telling beings. Stories have always been an important means of communicating lived experiences and creative renderings.

## NARRATIVE INQUIRY: STAGES AND STEPS

The stages of narrative inquiry involve the field, texts on field experience, and the research text which incorporates the field and the texts and represents those issues of social significance that justify the research.

Narrative inquiry is an inductive approach, whereby the researcher begins with explorations of the phenomenon of experience rather than in a comparative analysis of various theoretical methodological frames.

Using narrative as a methodological tool, research can be conducted in several ways. Typically, though, the researcher either collects a) stories as data and seeks to understand underlying themes from the stories, or b) descriptions of events through interviews, journal entries, documents, artifacts, and observations, and it is important that there is evidence of triangulation of data sources.

The researcher then synthesises the data into narratives or stories where the outcome is a co-constructed narrative between researcher and participants. In narrative analysis, the researcher and participants co-construct meaning throughout the research process rather than as a separate activity carried out after data collection. As such, the process of data gathering, and analysis becomes a single harmonious and organic process.

The narrative research process is, therefore, highly personal as it requires a very close relationship between the researcher and the participant which needs to be mutually constructed and allows each voice to be equally heard. In contrast to traditional research, narrative research is typically more accessible due to the ability of the researcher to tell stories of specific events using engaging writing techniques of fiction, such as exaggeration, dramatic recall, and unusual phrasings to meet literary criteria of coherence, verisimilitude, and interest.

According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), the steps in the narrative research process look something like this:

1. Identify purpose of the research study and a phenomenon to explore.
2. Decide on the particular narrative approach as the nature of the stages and steps will vary accordingly.
3. Identify an individual (self or other) or individuals who can help you learn about the phenomenon.
4. Develop initial narrative research questions.
5. Consider the researcher's role in relation to the participants and the context.
6. Develop data collection methods, paying particular attention to interviewing.
7. Collaborate with the research participant(s) to construct/co-construct the narrative and to validate the accuracy of the story.
8. Write the narrative account.

Cortazzi (1993, p. 17) describes Connelly & Clandinin's method in an educational setting in the following way:

Connelly and Clandinin start with observed practical events in the classroom. The observer makes field notes reflecting in action, and then there is an open-ended interview

with the teacher, where both reflect on the action, querying the observed practice. A narrative account of the classroom practice is drawn up by the researcher and is validated by the teacher to yield an interpretive reconstruction of curriculum meaning, based on the story of the teacher', personal experience. The observed and the reflected upon are embedded in a 'narrative unity': a continuum within a person's experience which renders life experience meaningful through the unity they achieve for the person. This study of narrative is aimed at explicating experiential understanding of teachers thinking in terms of everyday meaning, developing a theory in terms of practice.

## ANALYSING NARRATIVE 1

(Based on Crossley, 2007)

The assumption within narrative psychological analysis is that we are interested in learning something about our own and others' personal narratives and, in turn, about the light those narratives throw upon psychological and social realities. Understanding the content and complexity of meanings in which narratives are produced is therefore crucial. This is no easy task. Meaning is not just 'transparently' available within an interview, a transcript or an autobiographical script. It has to be achieved through a process of interpretation and engagement with the text. A number of specific analytic steps need to be taken when conducting an analysis of one's own personal narrative. These are identified below:

### SIX ANALYTIC STEPS IN NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

1. Reading and familiarizing
2. Identifying important concepts to look for (specifically tone, imagery and themes)
3. Identifying 'narrative tone'
4. Identifying narrative themes and images
5. Weaving all of this together into a coherent story
6. Writing-up as a research report

#### Step 1: Reading and familiarizing

The very first step in the analysis consists of repeatedly reading through the whole transcript (or alternative data source) about five or six times in order to familiarize yourself with the material and to obtain a very general gist of emerging and significant themes.

#### Step 2: Identifying important concepts to look for

The second step is to develop a grasp of the principal elements of the 'personal narrative' that you need to identify. There are three of these: (a) narrative tone, (b) imagery and (c) themes. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

- a. *Narrative Tone* Narrative tone is perhaps the most pervasive feature of a personal narrative in adulthood and is conveyed both in the content of the story and also the form or manner in which it is told. For example, the tone can be predominantly optimistic or pessimistic. An optimistic story can be optimistic because good things happen or because, even though bad things happen, one remains hopeful that things will improve. Similarly, a pessimistic story can be pessimistic because of a series of bad events or because good things are perceived in a negative light.

- b. *Imagery* Every personal narrative contains and expresses a characteristic set of images. In order to understand our own narratives, we must explore the unique way in which we employ imagery to make sense of who we are. Pay careful attention to the kind of language used in describing and characterizing your life chapters and key events. It may provide a clue to personally meaningful images, symbols and metaphors. Like our identities, imagery is both discovered and made. We make our own images but the nature of that making is strongly dependent on the raw materials (such as language and stories) made available in our culture. When you have identified the characteristic set of imagery employed in your own case, try and explore the genesis of that imagery. How has it developed? Is it related to your family background - some psychologists argue that an adult's personal imagery is largely established in the complex family dynamics of the first three or four years of life - or can it be located more widely within the dominant discourses (incorporating morals, values and belief systems) of the society in which you live?
- c. *Themes* What are the dominant themes in your personal narrative? Underlying the many events reported in your account, can you see any pattern with regard to what has motivated you or what has been particularly important to you? In interpreting your autobiographical account, you should look carefully at what it tells you about your own motivational themes. To what extent are you driven by power or love? More importantly, in what particular ways do the needs for power and love express themselves in your story? These needs often become especially apparent during times when we experience our identities as 'in crisis' - for example, during adolescence, when experiencing illness or when experiencing bereavement. We notice inconsistencies between who we once were and who we are now. This disparity may be so striking that we summon up questions never asked before, such as 'Who is the real me?', 'Who am I'? We may begin to take seriously the possibility of alternative lives never before seriously entertained. Such 'episodes' in our lives provide clues to what drives, motivates and is important to us in our lives.

#### Step 3: Identifying 'narrative tone'

In order to identify narrative tone, you need to look at both what you have reported in relation to your own past experiences and also the way in which you have done so.

#### Step 4: Identifying 'imagery' and 'themes'

It is useful to look for both imagery and themes together. This is because they overlap and the use of certain images and imagery tends to point towards and be indicative of particular themes. I have found that the easiest way to identify imagery and themes is to work through the transcript in a systematic fashion, starting first with the 'life chapters' question and then proceeding separately through each of the interview questions. Imagery and themes should be identified in relation to each question. At this stage of the analysis, you are still really only trying to get a very general overview of the data. The aim is to draw up a kind of 'rough map' of the picture emerging from the interview.

#### Step 5: Weaving all of this together into a coherent story

Having constructed a rough, 'working map' of the various images and themes emerging from your interpretation of the interview data, your next step is to weave all of this together into a coherent story.

## Step 6: Writing up as a research report

At this stage, you should be in a position to move from your identification, analysis and construction of a coherent account of your personal narrative to the actual process of writing this up. It may be that this write-up will take the form of a research report to be submitted as part of coursework assessment. To some extent, in this kind of qualitative analysis, the division between analysis and writing-up is arbitrary because analysis continues during the actual process of writing. How do you transform your narrative analysis into a research report? There are a number of different sections to be included in a research report. These sections should be constructed in the following order:

- (i) Introduction;
- (ii) Method;
- (iii) Results;
- (iv) Analysis/Discussion;
- (v) Reflection;
- (vi) References.

However, it is possible to be creative in the development of alternative forms of reporting narrative research.

## ANALYSING NARRATIVE 2

(Based on Ezzy, 2002)

This very simple summary of an approach to analysing narratives is from Douglas Ezzy's 2002 book, *Qualitative Analysis*:

1. Compile the stories
2. Analyse the content, the discourse, and the context of each story, focusing on insights and understandings
3. Compare and contrast stories for similarities and differences in content, style, and interpretation
4. Consider the effects of background variables (ie: gender, age)
5. Identify stories or content that illustrate your themes, insights, and understandings.

## References

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